

Knowing Joy and Peace In A Fallen World

By

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Preface

This is a study of Joy and Peace. It's based on two fundamental propositions:

1. Ultimately, we desire two things – and two things only – in this life: Joy and Peace.
2. Ultimately, God promises to provide two things – and two things only – in this life: Joy and Peace.

Complicating matters is the not-so-insignificant fact that we are born into a world where many times good people suffer and bad people prosper (at least temporarily).

It all comes down to the age-old question of: How can I find true happiness in a fallen world?

Clear, satisfying answers are in the Bible, and the purpose of this study is to help you discover them.

Notes

What follows begins with a “blank slate,” assuming the reader knows nothing about God or the Bible. It establishes foundational truths, and then builds upon them bit by bit, chapter by chapter. The first six chapters are introductory, and we won’t actually begin to look at Joy and Peace until the seventh and final chapter, which makes up the main body of the work.

So if you don’t know anything about the Bible, you’re in great shape! If you’ve been studying it all your life, try to set what you know aside as you read, so you can approach these things with fresh, bright eyes.



There are many Bible verses quoted throughout this work. They are there to ensure what is written reflects the principles contained in God’s Word and not merely the opinions of the author.

Quotations are taken from either the New International Version (NIV) or New American Standard Bible (NASB).

The quotations from the Bible are printed in bold. Don’t skip over them! It is within the Word of God that you will find the truth, and it is truth that takes us from darkness to light.

As the British poet laureate John Masefield wrote:

*Man with his burning soul
Has but an hour of breath.
To build a ship of Truth
In which his soul may sail,
Sail on the sea of death,
For death takes toll
Of beauty, courage, youth
Of all but Truth.**

* Masefield, John. “Truth.” *Philip the King, and Other Poems*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914.

Introduction

ULTIMATELY, WE DESIRE TWO THINGS – AND TWO THINGS ONLY – IN THIS LIFE: JOY AND PEACE.

A life of passion and contentment.

Joy is enthusiasm for life. It's waking up in the morning and being glad you're alive. It's the spark in your eyes and the spring in your step. It's living life with passion.

Peace is satisfaction with life. It's going to bed at night and feeling secure, no matter what the day has brought. It's the depth of your eyes and the firmness of your step. It's living life with contentment.

We might chase after money, power, fame, promiscuous sex, alcohol, drugs, or any number of material things, but when it's all said and done, it's Joy and Peace we're really after.

We may desire a fulfilling marriage, great kids, to accomplish some wonderful deed for God or our fellow man, or any number of other worthy things, but again, it's Joy and Peace we're really after.

The reason we want all these things is that we mistakenly believe once we possess them we will finally know happiness – a deep, abiding passion for, and contentment with, life. Whether we presently realize it or not, every single thing we pursue in our lives is a means to an end: Knowing Joy and Peace.

ULTIMATELY, GOD PROMISES TO PROVIDE TWO THINGS – AND TWO THINGS ONLY – IN THIS LIFE: JOY AND PEACE.

A world of darkness and uncertainty.

God doesn't promise money, power, fame, or any material thing during our brief time on earth. Nor does He promise marriage, children, health, or ease. This is not to say that most of us won't experience these things to some degree. Most of us will. But we are born into a fallen world that is all too often full of darkness and uncertainty. There are no guarantees, and there are many examples throughout the Bible and in our common experience of good men and women whose lives were marked by suffering and dreams that didn't come true.

Something greater than the world.

But some men and women discover something greater than prosperity and success as the world sees it. They come to know what the Bible describes as Joy “inexpressible” (1 Peter 1:8) and Peace “surpassing comprehension” (Philippians 4:7), in times of prosperity and even in their darkest hour. In fact, they know it in their brightest hour, their darkest hour, and every shade in between, because the Joy and Peace God promises to give each and every one of us are not dependent upon our circumstances, but rather upon each individual’s choices to receive or reject the grace of God.

God promises that if we will take His hand and walk with Him, we will know true Joy and true Peace. Our lives will take on meaning and purpose. We can wake up every morning excited to meet the day with confidence and courage, and no matter what happens, even if our world seems to fall apart, we can go to bed feeling safe, secure, and content. That’s better than being famous, rich, or powerful, and indulging ourselves in the things that fame, wealth, and power can afford.

IS IT REALLY TRUE?

What follows.

Are Joy and Peace what we truly long for in this life? Can we really experience Joy and Peace, not only when our lives are good (which can be difficult enough), but also when our lives turn dark and ugly? Is it really better than the material things the world has to offer?

The answers to these questions are a resounding “Yes!” and what follows is an attempt to explain why, based upon the truths contained in the Bible.

Chapter One begins with an examination of the nature of God. Before we can understand anything about ourselves or the world around us, we must first clearly understand who God is and how He behaves towards us. An accurate understanding of God is the indispensable foundation for an accurate understanding of everything else in life. Misconceptions about God have a devastating effect and distort everything we perceive as truth.

In Chapter Two we take a hard look at ourselves. Now that we see God for who He truly is, we need to see ourselves for who we truly are. We must understand what mankind is capable of doing, for both good and evil. How “good” can we actually be? Are we responsible for the wrongs we commit? How does all of this affect our potential to experience true happiness?

Once we begin to understand God and ourselves, then we can start to examine how we relate to one another. This is the subject of Chapter Three. What is the true nature of the relationship between God and humanity? How can we have a relationship with God that is real and immediate? Must we have a relationship with Him at all? What is God's responsibility towards His creation, and what is our responsibility towards our Creator?

With an understanding of God, ourselves, and the relationship between God and mankind, we can then start to make sense of the world around us. We find ourselves born into a world of both great beauty and unspeakable sadness. Chapter Four begins an examination of life in a fallen world.

Chapter Five summarizes all we have learned so far and describes how we respond to the call of the One who created us. We understand (in principle) God, ourselves, and the nature of our relationship within a fallen world. Now we look at how (in practice) we develop and nurture this relationship so it can resonate in our lives. How can we truly know and walk with the living God?

What happens when we do know and walk with God? Chapter Six describes the (for lack of a better phrase) *outward results* of heeding the call of God: We discover the purpose God had in mind when He chose to create us. We find our place in life and accomplish what we are called to do in His plan. We become instruments in the hands of the living God.

In Chapter Seven, we see the *inward results* of a close, intimate relationship with God: Joy "inexpressible" and Peace "surpassing comprehension," a state of being wherein the course of our lives becomes a music composed by God and played out in the world, through our every thought, word, and deed. This is the ultimate will of God for you, what God promises you will experience as you walk with Him through both the wonderful and the heartbreaking circumstances of life.

It's something only God can give to you. And the only one who can deprive you of it is: Yourself.

Finally, in the Coda we will look at the eternal results of a life lived in harmony with God.

Chapter 1

UNDERSTANDING GOD (GOD'S HOLINESS AND LOVE)

A CLEAR, ACCURATE UNDERSTANDING OF WHO GOD IS AND HOW HE BEHAVES IS THE MOST IMPORTANT POSSESSION IN ALL OF LIFE.

An indispensable foundation.

We will never understand ourselves or the world around us until we first understand God. How can we expect to make sense of the complexities of the human heart or the injustices that afflict all creation if we do not first understand the One who created our hearts and the world in which we live? We might as well try to perform calculus without knowing how to add, subtract, multiply, and divide, or try to solve a riddle told in a language we do not understand. We will never truly comprehend who Jesus is and what He did on the cross, unless we first understand the nature and ways of the One who sent Him. Understanding God is the indispensable foundation of all other knowledge.

Jeremiah 9:23,24 “Thus says the LORD, ‘Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,’ declares the LORD.” (NASB)

A misunderstanding of God's nature and ways distorts everything we perceive as truth. We look inside ourselves and upon the world through a warped lens. We develop false assumptions about life and a twisted view of the world around us. The end result is one of two things: We either become absolutely convinced that lies are truth and base dogmatic actions upon a foundation of deceit; or we despair of ever finding the truth and resign ourselves to empty lives with nothing to believe in. The most devastating thing in all the world is a fundamental misunderstanding of who God is and how He behaves.

John 16:2,3 “... an hour is coming for everyone who kills you (*Jesus' disciples*) to think that he is offering service to God. These things they will do because they have not known the Father or Me (*Jesus*).” (NASB)

Ecclesiastes 2:11 “Yet when I (*Solomon, perhaps the richest, most powerful man in all of history*) surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.” (NIV)

When we see God as He truly is and come to know the principles upon which He behaves, then our vision comes into focus. We begin to understand ourselves and our fellow mankind, and how we might somehow find a happiness in life that is not just a fleeting moment of distraction, but instead something truly satisfying and permanent. Understanding all God is, and all He is able and willing to do on our behalf, is the ballast at the bottom of our ship that keeps us sailing straight and true, even in a storm. The greatest favor any person can do for himself or herself is to develop a clear, deep understanding of God upon which to test every thought and build every dream.

Colossians 1:9,10 “... be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;” (NASB)

Ecclesiastes 2:26 “To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness...” (NIV)

Proverbs 24:3,4 “By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established; through knowledge its rooms are filled with rare and beautiful treasures.” (NIV)

The characteristics and behavior of God.

Volumes could be devoted to the subject of this brief opening chapter. Exploring the nature and ways of God is a lifetime’s work, and there are a variety of excellent approaches to the subject. For example, it’s important to understand the basic characteristics of God, such as His:

- *Sovereignty* – authority over all creation.

Psalms 103:19 “The LORD has established His throne in the heavens, and His sovereignty rules over all.” (NASB)

1 Chronicles 29:11,12 “Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours... you are exalted as head over all... you are the ruler of all things...” (NIV)

- *Righteousness* – perfect character.

Psalms 145:17 “The LORD is righteous in all his ways and faithful in all he does.” (NIV)

Psalm 36:5-7 “Your love, LORD, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies. Your righteousness is like the highest mountains, your justice like the great deep... How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings.” (NIV)

- *Justice* – perfect fairness.

Isaiah 30:18 “Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!” (NIV)

Deuteronomy 32:4 “He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.” (NIV)

- *Love* – that is infinite and absolute.

Psalm 118:1 “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.” (NIV)

1 John 4:8 “... God is love.” (NIV)

- *Eternal Life* – without beginning or end.

Revelation 1:8 “ ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.’ ” (NIV)

1 Timothy 1:17 “Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.” (NIV)

- *Omniscience* – infinite knowledge.

Psalm 147:5 “Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit.” (NIV)

Hebrews 4:13 “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” (NIV)

- *Omnipotence* – infinite power.

Jeremiah 32:17 “Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you.” (NIV)

Matthew 19:26 “Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.’ ” (NIV)

- *Omnipresence* – existing everywhere.

Psalm 139:7,8 “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.” (NIV)

Jeremiah 23:24 “ ‘Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?... Do not I fill heaven and earth?’ declares the LORD.” (NIV)

- *Immutability* – never changing.

James 1:17 “Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.” (NASB)

Hebrews 13:8 “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” (NIV)

- *Truthfulness* – never lying.

Hebrews 6:18 “... it is impossible for God to lie...” (NIV)

Psalms 33:4 “For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does.” (NIV)

It’s also essential to understand how God behaves towards us. The Bible declares that God is:

- *Merciful.*

2 Corinthians 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort,” (NASB)

Titus 3:5 “he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy...” (NIV)

- *Compassionate.*

James 5:11 “... The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.” (NIV)

Lamentations 3:31-33 “For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone.” (NIV)

- *Faithful.*

Psalms 145:8-18 “The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love... The LORD is righteous in all his ways and faithful in all he does. The LORD is near to all who call on him...” (NIV)

2 Timothy 2:13 “If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.” (NASB)

- *Kind.*

Isaiah 54:8 “ ‘... with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you,’ says the LORD your Redeemer.” (NIV)

Romans 2:4 “Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?” (NIV)

- *Patient.*

2 Peter 3:9 “The Lord is... patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (NIV)

1 Timothy 1:16 “... I (*Paul*) was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.” (NIV)

- *Forgiving.*

Micah 7:18,19 “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression... You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.” (NIV)

Psalms 130:3,4 “If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you.” (NIV)

For purposes of this study, we are going to focus on two great currents that run through the being of God as He is revealed in the Bible – two pillars upon which rest all God is and all God does. Both are infinite and absolute, and together govern the thoughts, words, and deeds of the One who created the universe and everything in it.

GOD IS HOLY, AND GOD IS LOVE.

Dual anchors.

God’s holiness and love are two anchors that help us understand the nature and ways of our Creator. Every characteristic and behavior of God can be seen as flowing from these headwaters. It’s also useful in times of confusion or fear to have something steady and simple for each hand to hold on to, and knowing God’s holiness and love can bring stability in every circumstance.

Webster’s defines *holy* as “spiritually perfect.”* The concept focuses on the perfect integrity and unimpeachable character of God, as well as His worthiness and capacity to rule over all creation for all time. God’s character is pure. He is altogether righteous, just, and truthful, which entitles Him to ultimate, sovereign authority over everything and everyone. His absolute integrity is eternal and immutable, everlasting and unchanging. He is omniscient (all-knowing), omnipotent (all-powerful) and

* Webster’s II New Riverside Dictionary (The Berkley Publishing Group, New York 1983).

omnipresent (existing everywhere), infinitely capable of bringing about His perfect will.

Psalm 99:9 “... the LORD our God is holy.” (NIV)

Isaiah 6:3 “... Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” (NIV)

In a sense, the Bible defines *love* as: God (1 John 4:8)! The entirety of the Bible is an exhaustive description of God’s love for mankind. Over and over again, we see God being compassionate and merciful to a rebellious creation. He is faithful, even when we are faithless. He is patient and kind, always ready to forgive and renew a repentant heart.

1 John 4:8 “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.” (NIV)

Psalm 145:8-16 “The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made... The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does. The LORD upholds all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down... You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.” (NIV)

GOD’S HOLINESS AND LOVE ARE INFINITE AND ABSOLUTE.

Measuring the immeasurable.

It’s extremely important to understand something about God’s holiness and love: They are infinite and absolute parts of God’s being. They are not relative or even quantifiable. God is not really, really, really holy. He is perfect, pure, incorruptible, incomparable holiness. God doesn’t love a whole, whole, whole lot. He loves absolutely, immeasurably, indescribably, forever.

The Bible uses the same metaphor to describe the nature of God’s holiness and love. In both Isaiah 55:8,9 and Psalm 103:11, the endless reach of the heavens is likened to the holiness and love of God. Just as the expanse of the universe cannot be measured, so the boundaries of God’s holiness and love cannot be set. They are limitless, impossible for the finite human mind to truly grasp.

Isaiah 55:8,9 “ ‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the LORD. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (a reference to the holiness of God).’ ” (NIV)

Psalm 103:11 “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love...” (NIV)

The ramifications of these truths – that God is both pure holiness and pure love – are profound and far-reaching, and we will build upon the foundation of these concepts as we move forward through this study. Knowing our Creator is the embodiment of immeasurable holiness and love is the bedrock for knowing Joy and Peace in a fallen world.

1 Samuel 6:20 “... Who can stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God?...”
(NIV)

Lamentations 3:21-25 “This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. The LORD’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. ‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I have hope in Him.’ The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him.” (NASB)

Chapter 2

UNDERSTANDING OURSELVES

(MANKIND'S GOOD AND EVIL)

WHAT MAKES US HUMAN IS: FREEWILL, THE ABILITY TO CHOOSE BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL.

Unique in all creation.

Our planet is bursting with different kinds of life. There is animal and plant life. There are microscopic organisms. We find mammals, birds, insects, reptiles, and fish. Yet humanity is unique in that, of the myriad inhabitants of our planet, only mankind has been granted the freedom to choose between benevolent and destructive acts. A potato can't choose whether to save a row of wheat from the farmer's plow, and while animals certainly make decisions, their behavior is governed by instinct and personality rather than distinctions made upon moral principles. It is within the singular province of humanity to choose to do good or evil in the eyes of God.

Deuteronomy 30:19 "... I (God) have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live..." (NASB)

Nature, nurture, or something else?

Life is a braid of decisions. We all start with different strengths and weaknesses, advantages and disadvantages, but the beauty of the tapestry of our lives is determined by the choices we make. Good decisions made consistently over time weave an image in harmony with God's plan and purpose. Bad decisions distort the picture and mar God's intended design.

Psalms 37:3-34 "Trust in the LORD and do good... delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart... trust in him and he... will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn... The LORD makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him; though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand... Hope in the LORD and keep his way. He will exalt you..." (NIV)

Proverbs 19:3 "A person's own folly leads to their ruin, yet their heart rages against the LORD." (NIV)

Galatians 6:7 "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows." (NIV)

Scholars argue whether it is “nature” (our genetic makeup) or “nurture” (our environment) that determines an individual’s ultimate success or failure. While these factors certainly influence the course of our lives, in the end, it is the decisions we make that determine our happiness. You will never be a rocket scientist unless you are born with a high I.Q. You will never be a champion snow skier if you live all of your life in the desert. But whether we experience Joy and Peace in this life is determined by one factor and one factor alone: The choices we make to do right or to do wrong.

Joshua 24:15 “... choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...” (NIV)

Romans 15:13 “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him...” (NIV)

Free to choose.

As free moral agents, we can choose to do what is “right” or “good.” These are the things that are pleasing to God and beneficial to our fellow mankind and to ourselves.

Hebrews 13:16 “And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.” (NIV)

James 1:27 “Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” (NASB)

Proverbs 12:20 “Deceit is in the heart of those who devise evil, but counselors of peace have joy.” (NASB)

We can also choose to do what is “wrong” or “evil,” and these decisions are what the Bible refers to as “sin.” Generally speaking, we can divide sin into three areas. There are sins in our:

Thoughts, such as hatred, jealousy, bitterness, and self-righteousness;

Ephesians 4:31,32 “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (NIV)

Proverbs 23:7 “... as (*a man*) thinks within himself, so he is...” (NASB)

Words, such as when we lie, gossip, slander, and malign; and

James 3:2-10 “For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. Now if we put the bits into the horses’ mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the

inclination of the pilot desires. So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire... and sets on fire the course of our life... no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.” (NASB)

Deeds, such as murder, adultery, theft, etc.

Exodus 20:13-15 “You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal.” (NIV)

And so we find ourselves the possessors of a gift that bears tremendous responsibility, a gift of freedom to intend good or evil that is governed solely by our will, with which even the Creator of the universe will not interfere. This freewill – the ability to choose between right and wrong – is what makes us human. It’s what separates us from the rest of earthly creation. We are free moral agents put on this planet and given the freedom to choose between good and evil. Understanding this is a first step towards understanding ourselves.

A second step is to understand what this means. We know what makes us human, but where does that leave us? What we must determine next is: What are the consequences of having freewill? If there is a God and He has given us this ultimate gift of freedom, where then do we belong in the great order of things, and especially in our relationship to Him? What does it *mean* to be human?

Be warned, the answers to these riddles call for a humble heart, willing to look objectively at both our strengths and weaknesses as individuals and as a species.

TO KNOW WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN REQUIRES THE ACCEPTANCE OF TWO GREAT AND DIFFICULT TRUTHS: EVERYONE SINS, AND EVERYONE FALLS SHORT OF THE GLORY OF GOD.

Everyone sins.

Romans 3:23 “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” (NIV)

Sometimes our sins are great, and sometimes our sins are small, but choosing to do wrong is unfortunately part of the human condition, and we are lying to ourselves if we think we never sin. If we look truthfully into our hearts, we will come to the realization that each of us has to varying degrees chosen to do wrong during the course of our lives.

1 John 1:8 “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” (NIV)

1 Kings 8:46 “... for there is no one who does not sin...” (NIV)

Ecclesiastes 7:20 “Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins.” (NASB)

Isaiah 53:6 “We all, like sheep, have gone astray...” (NIV)

For many, the idea that everyone sins may not be a difficult proposition with which to agree. It’s evident in ourselves and in those around us, even in those we love, every day.

What is often more difficult to understand and accept is what is revealed in the second part of Romans 3:23. It has to do with our righteous acts, our good deeds, separate and apart from our sins. If we completely ignore the fact that we sin and look solely at the good we do, what do we see when we compare our righteousness to the righteousness of God? If we reflect on the holiness and love of God as they are revealed in the scriptures, and then humbly and objectively consider the sum total of our own good deeds, the full meaning of Romans 3:23 becomes abundantly clear.

Everyone falls short.

Romans 3:23 “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” (NIV)

If we take every good deed we have ever done or ever will do, stack them one on top of the other, then multiply them by ten thousand, this sum still cannot even begin to compare to the glory of the One who created and sustains the heavens and the earth. This is not to belittle the good we do, but rather to give due credence to the good God has done from eternity past and will continue to do for all time.

We have not yet studied all that makes God worthy of our praise and worship, but we will as we move forward, and what we will discover is that the righteousness, justice, mercy, compassion, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and gentleness of the holy, loving God are endless, and what we are able to grasp of Him now is only a shadow of what we will know when we go to be with Him for all eternity. The sum total of all that God is, God’s “glory,” is truly immeasurable, and when we compare our glory to His glory, every one of us falls short.

Psalms 8:1-4 “O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth, who have displayed Your splendor above the heavens!... When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained; what is man...?” (NASB)

Isaiah 64:6 “... all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment...” (NASB)

Isaiah 55:8,9 “ ‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the LORD. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’ ” (NIV)

Psalm 143:2 “And do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no man living is righteous.” (NASB)

1 Samuel 2:2 “There is no one holy like the LORD...” (NIV)

Revelation 15:4 “Who will not fear you, Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy...” (NIV)

Again, this is not to disparage or devalue the righteous acts that we do (which as we shall see are essential in fulfilling God’s plan for our lives) but rather to put them in proper perspective with the righteousness of God. We want to understand ourselves, and we want this knowledge to be bathed in the light of a true understanding of who God is: The embodiment of immeasurable holiness and love.

Preparing the heart.

To understand what makes us human and what it means to be human, we must first come to terms with these two great and difficult truths: Everyone sins and everyone falls short of the glory of God. If we can humbly accept the facts that we are sinners and even on our best day our glory cannot compare to God’s glory, then our hearts are open and ready to learn about the true relationship between God and mankind. And as we learn how God and humanity relate to one another in a way that preserves the perfect holiness and love of God, and at the same time allows for the freewill of mankind to be exercised without hindrance, then questions as to the meaning of our existence are transformed from the unknowable to the obvious.

Job 38:1 through 40:8 “Then the Lord spoke Job... ‘Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone – while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?... Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place... Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been shown to you? Have you seen the gates of the deepest darkness? Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth? Tell me, if you know all this. What is the way to the abode of light? And where does darkness reside? Can you take them to their places? Do you know the paths to their dwellings? Surely you know for you were already born! You have lived so many years!... Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades? Can you loosen Orion’s belt? Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons... Do you give the horse its strength or clothe its neck with a flowing mane?... Does the eagle soar at your command...? Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!... Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?’ ” (NIV)

Isaiah 40:25-31 “ ‘To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?’ says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by

name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing. Why do you complain...? Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” (NIV)

Chapter 3

UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOD AND MAN (GOD'S GRACE AND MANKIND'S FREEWILL)

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD GROWS FROM THE PLACE WHERE GOD'S HOLINESS AND LOVE MEET MANKIND'S GOOD AND EVIL.

The dilemma.

We will discover how God and mankind relate to one another by building upon what we have learned so far about God and humanity. God is holy and God is love. Mankind sins and our "good" falls short. This sets up a dilemma. How can God love a sinful, fallen creation and still remain holy?

Remember, God's holiness is infinite and absolute. As a result, it utterly rejects the sin of mankind. God's pure, righteous character condemns sin in its entirety forever. The holy, pure, unstained God can have nothing to do with the evil of mankind. He can only condemn it.

Isaiah 1:13-18 "I (*God*) cannot endure iniquity... your sins are as scarlet... they are red like crimson..." (NASB)

Proverbs 3:32 "For the devious are an abomination to the LORD..." (NASB)

Romans 1:18 "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men..." (NASB)

Isaiah 59:2 "But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear." (NASB)

But God is also infinite, absolute love, and His love reaches out to His creation in its entirety forever. The loving, faithful, compassionate God will not abandon the work of His own hand, even when it reviles and rejects Him. He still can only love.

Jeremiah 31:3 "... I (*God*) have loved you with an everlasting love..." (NIV)

Psalms 130:7 "... put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love..." (NIV)

Lamentations 3:31,32 "For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love." (NIV)

Romans 8:38,39 "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (NIV)

It's as if the sin and shortcomings of humanity cause the holiness and love of God to be at war with one another. God's holiness utterly condemns fallen mankind. God's love utterly refuses to give up on us. In order for God to remain God (that is, to remain pure holiness and pure love), some solution must be found so God's love can be poured out upon fallen mankind without compromising God's holy character.

Even before time began, our God foresaw the dilemma He would encounter when His creation rejected Him, and as an expression of His endless love for us He provided the solution, which is: Grace.

Isaiah 43:1-5 “But now, this is what the LORD says – he who created you... he who formed you... ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine... For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior... Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you... Do not be afraid, for I am with you...’ ” (NIV)

Ephesians 1:4-6 “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace...” (NIV)

GRACE ALLOWS GOD TO LOVE SINFUL, FALLEN MANKIND AND STILL REMAIN HOLY.

The solution.

“Grace” is the word we will use to represent the totality of the holy God's loving provision for His fallen creation. It encompasses everything God has done – in the past, present, and future – to allow us to receive the fullness of His love, without ever forcing it upon us, and without ever causing God to set aside His holiness. God in His infinite wisdom has created a way whereby we can freely choose to receive or reject His love, while He is also able to preserve the purity of His holy character.

Ephesians 2:8 “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith...” (NIV)

Before we begin to examine God's grace, let's emphasize the very real dilemma presented by a fallen creation to a holy, loving God. In our human wisdom we might think: “Couldn't God just relax this holiness thing a little bit, give us a break, and love us warts and all? Isn't that what love is all about?”

The problem with this kind of thinking is that it flies in the face of everything that is revealed about God in the Bible. The God of the Bible is not a God of compromise or expediency. God doesn't bend the rules or look the other way. He emphatically does not behave like that. If He did, He would not be holy. He would be something

less. God is principled and pure in everything He does. “His ways are not our ways” and His standards are higher than ours as “the heavens are higher than the earth,” to paraphrase Isaiah 55:8,9. Grasping this truth is absolutely essential if we are ever going to understand who God truly is.

Habakkuk 1:12,13 “LORD... My God, my Holy One... Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing.” (NIV)

1 John 1:5 “... God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.” (NIV)

James 1:17 “Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.” (NASB)

Psalms 77:13 “Your ways, God, are holy. What god is as great as our God?” (NIV)

Lightning bolts and baseball caps.

Sometimes as we read through the Bible, it’s almost as if there are two different gods in its pages. There is the severe, wrathful God of judgment to be feared...

Lamentations 4:11-13 “The LORD has given full vent to his wrath; he has poured out his fierce anger. He kindled a fire in Zion that consumed her foundations... But it happened because of the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests, who shed within her the blood of the righteous.” (NIV)

Revelation 19:11-16 “I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. ‘He will rule them with an iron scepter.’ He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.” (NIV)

... and there is also the gentle, forgiving God of mercy to be adored.

2 Corinthians 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort,” (NASB)

Daniel 9:9 “The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him;” (NIV)

Ephesians 2:3-5 “... we... were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),” (NASB)

Instead of two gods, what we actually see in the scriptures is one holy, loving God who reveals *both* sides of His nature, like two sides of the same coin. The key to understanding how two such divergent natures can reside in one God is understanding His perfect plan of grace. When we understand grace, we can understand the holy anger of God being visited upon hardened hearts. Likewise, we can understand the eternal absolution lovingly granted without hesitation to the repentant heart of even the vilest sinner.

Proverbs 29:1 “Whoever remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will suddenly be destroyed – without remedy.” (NIV)

Isaiah 57:15-18 “For this is what the high and exalted One says – he who lives forever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. I will not accuse them forever, nor will I always be angry, for then they would faint away because of me – the very people I have created. I was enraged by their sinful greed; I punished them, and hid my face in anger... but I will heal them; I will guide them and restore comfort...’ ” (NIV)

Lamentations 3:31-42 “For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone... Why should the living complain when punished for their sins? Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD. Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven, and say: ‘We have sinned and rebelled...’ ” (NIV)

Jeremiah 3:13-15 “Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the LORD your God... Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding.” (NASB)

When we look closely at the scriptures, we do not find a bearded, bare-chested tyrant hurling lightning bolts at us from on high for making honest mistakes (a distortion of God’s holiness), nor do we find a little old man waddling around in sneakers and a baseball cap winking at our sins (a distortion of God’s love). Rather, we discover a great and glorious God, infinitely worthy of our reverence and respect (a genuine response to His holiness), who is also merciful and compassionate, infinitely worthy of our adoration and trust (a genuine response to His love).

1 Timothy 6:16 “... (*God*) alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen.” (NASB)

Psalms 33:4-22 “For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does. The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love. By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth... From heaven the LORD looks down and sees all mankind; from his dwelling place he watches all who live on earth – he who forms the hearts of all, who considers everything they do... the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear (*respect and revere*) him, on those whose hope is

in his unfailing love... May your unfailing love be with us, LORD, even as we put our hope in you.” (NIV)

Ecclesiastes 12:13,14 “The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.” (NASB)

A gentle whisper.

A wonderful example of how God reveals Himself to us is found in an episode in the life of the prophet Elijah, found in 1 Kings 18 and 19. God gives Elijah a miraculous victory over hundreds of the priests of Baal, who solicited temple prostitutes and performed human sacrifices in the land of Israel at the behest of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. Then the next day, Elijah discovers that Jezebel wants to kill him. Now God had literally just made fire rain down from the sky at Elijah’s request, as the last in a long series of miracles God had performed for His servant. But instead of trusting that God will continue to be with him, Elijah grows afraid, runs into the desert, and in a fit of self-pity declares that he wishes he was dead.

God seeks out Elijah and tells him to stand on a mountain because “the Lord is about to pass by.” A great storm tears through the mountains, shattering the rocks. Then comes an earthquake, and then a fire. But the Bible says “the Lord was not in” any of these mighty things. Instead, God comes to Elijah in a “gentle whisper.” The holy God can shake the earth if that’s what it takes to get our attention, but in His love He speaks in a gentle, quiet voice, inviting us to receive His grace.

1 Kings 19:11,12 “The LORD said (to Elijah), ‘Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.’ Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.” (NIV)

GRACE IS COMPOSED OF GOD’S SON, GOD’S WORD, AND GOD’S SPIRIT.

Three instruments.

There are many different, excellent ways to approach the subject of God’s grace. Grace encompasses the totality of God’s “gentle whisper” to mankind, urging us to heed His voice and receive His love. And so it is a vast and far-reaching subject with many avenues upon which to begin. For purposes of this study, we are going to focus on three instruments that together form the perfect voice of grace: God’s Son, God’s Word, and God’s Spirit.

GOD'S SON IS THE INSTRUMENT THROUGH WHICH GRACE IS ESTABLISHED.

The Son, the Messiah, the Christ.

In ancient cultures, fathers sent their sons as representatives to conduct and complete important transactions. The son spoke with full authority on behalf of the father. An agreement with the son was viewed by all as an agreement, not with the son, but with the father who sent him. The Bible uses this imagery when it speaks of Jesus Christ, the "Son of God," who was sent into the world to establish the grace of God the Father.

John 20:31 "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (NIV)

The name "Jesus" is *Yeshua* in the Hebrew (short for *Yehoshua* or Joshua). It means "savior." "Christ" is simply the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word *Messiah*, which means "Anointed One." The words Messiah and Christ as used in the Old Testament and the New Testament of the Bible represent the One sent by God the Father into the world to reveal all God is and all God wills for His creation.

Hebrews 1:2,3 "... (*God*) has spoken to us in His Son... He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature..." (NASB)

Colossians 1:19-20 "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him (*Jesus*), and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." (NIV)

John 6:38 "For I (*Jesus*) have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me." (NIV)

John 4:34 "'My food,' said Jesus, 'is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.'" (NIV)

The God-man.

But who is this Jesus? What did He accomplish during His brief time on earth, 2000 years ago, and why should it be important to us today? In order to answer these questions, we must begin in eternity past. The Bible reveals that, even before the creation of the heavens or the earth or any of its inhabitants, God looked forward through the corridor of time and foresaw all things that would transpire throughout human history, including that mankind would sin, fall short of God's glory, and need to be redeemed.

Ephesians 1:3-8 "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ... For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in

his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will... In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace." (NIV)

Isaiah 46:9-11 "... I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, 'My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure'... Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it." (NASB)

Ephesians 2:10 "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

As an expression of His great love for us, God chose to become a man – a man who would be the instrument through which grace is established on earth. The name that was given to this man is: Jesus.

John 1:1-14 "In the beginning was the Word (*Jesus*, see **Revelation 19:11-16**), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God... And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." (NASB)

Philippians 2:5-9 "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name," (NASB)

Colossians 1:15 "The Son is the image of the invisible God..." (NIV)

God became man to bring grace. Jesus is therefore God. Jesus shares all the characteristics of the nature and behavior of God. Jesus is also man. He is both God *and* man in one person. He is not a mixture of the two; that is, neither God nor man. He is undiminished deity and true humanity in one person forever, the unique being of all creation: The God-man. This is known in theology as the doctrine of the "hypostatic union."

Romans 1:3 "... His Son... was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh," (NASB)

Isaiah 9:6 "For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us... And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace." (NASB)

Colossians 2:9 "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form," (NIV)

John 10:30 "I (*Jesus*) and the Father are one." (NIV)

It can be difficult to grasp how Jesus can be both God and man at the same time, but remember God is omnipotent (Matthew 19:26; Jeremiah 32:17; Job 42:2). God can do anything, even become a man if He so chooses, while still retaining His deity. Omnipotence is one of the *infinite* characteristics of God, which have no limits. Our minds are *finite*, with many limitations. And so we will never be able to fully comprehend how God accomplishes certain things with His infinite power. But we are not called to understand the mechanics of how God does the miraculous things described in His Word. Instead, we are called to have faith that God's Word is true. If God says He has done something, He has done it. We can trust Him and believe.

John 14:9,10 “Jesus answered... ‘Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father... Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?...’ ” (NIV)

The perfect role model.

God became a man to bring grace. How did Jesus bring grace to the world? As a starting point, Jesus led a perfect, sinless life.

1 John 3:5 “You know that He (*Jesus*) appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin.” (NASB)

Hebrews 4:15,16 “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (NASB)

1 Peter 1:18,19 “... you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold... but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.” (NASB)

During the 33 years Jesus was on the earth, He never sinned. He faced every challenge, disappointment, and triumph with the humility and love God desires to see in each of us. In so doing, Jesus set the example for how we are to live our lives. Jesus is the role model provided by God for us to follow if we wish to live lives that will bring us Joy and Peace. As we examine the life of Christ, we discover the perfect pattern for the life God desires for us.

1 Peter 2:21-23 “... Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously;” (NASB)

Ephesians 5:2 “and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (NIV)

1 John 4:16,17 “... God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus.” (NIV)

1 John 2:6 “Whoever claims to live in him (*Jesus*) must live as Jesus did.” (NIV)

The perfect sacrifice.

Jesus lived a perfect life and showed us firsthand how to love God and love one another. How did humanity respond to this gift from heaven? We crucified Him.

Jesus' love was met with mankind's hatred. We did not love the light Jesus brought into the fallen world. We sought to destroy it. Jesus spread a message of love, peace, and reconciliation between God and man, for which He was scorned, reviled, and threatened. Jesus also exposed the hypocrisy of the religious establishment of the day, and ultimately He was put to death for crimes He did not commit. After being beaten, spat upon, scourged with a Roman whip (a process whereby most of the flesh was torn from His back), and mockingly crowned with a circle of long, cruel Judean thorns, Jesus' hands and feet were nailed to a wooden cross, and He was left there to die, suspended between heaven and earth.

John 3:17-19 “For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him... This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil.” (NASB)

John 15:18 “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me (*Jesus*) first.” (NIV)

Luke 23:13-33 “Pilate summoned the chief priests and the rulers and the people, and said to them, ‘You brought this man to me as one who incites the people to rebellion, and behold, having examined Him before you, I have found no guilt in this man... nothing deserving death has been done by Him...’ But they were insistent, with loud voices asking that He be crucified. And their voices began to prevail. And Pilate pronounced sentence that their demand be granted... When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him...” (NASB)

But as Jesus hung on the cross, instead of returning evil for evil, or calling upon the powers of His deity to punish and avenge, He committed the greatest act of pure love in all of history, and the grace of God was established on earth. Jesus willingly received the punishment for the sins of the entire world. God the Father took the sins of all humanity and poured them out upon Jesus, and Jesus paid the eternal price for each and every one of them. Jesus paid for every sin ever committed by every person who has ever or will ever live. And through His saving work on the cross, we are redeemed.

1 Peter 2:24 “and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.” (NASB)

Colossians 2:13,14 “... He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.” (NASB)

Titus 2:13,14 “... Christ Jesus... gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed...” (NASB)

1 John 1:7 “... the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.” (NIV)

The perfect gift.

Because of who Jesus is and what He did on the cross, God is able to offer salvation as a free gift to all mankind. All that is required is a choice to receive it. There is no penance to pay, nor are their works to be done. Jesus did all of the work Himself as He hung on the cross. We are simply called to believe in Jesus and accept His gift.

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (NIV)

Romans 6:23 “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NASB)

In order to receive the gift of salvation, all we need to do is offer God a simple prayer of trust in Jesus. There are no magic words. We just tell our Heavenly Father we believe Jesus died for our sins, and we want Him to be our Savior. This prayer can be offered in the privacy of our own thoughts, anywhere we are, no matter what the circumstances. There is no requirement to join a church, confess our sins to another person, or perform any sort of sacrament or penance. We need only pray this simple prayer once. This is God’s grace.

Acts 16:31 “... Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved...” (NIV)

Two extraordinary things.

When we pray this simple prayer for salvation, two extraordinary things happen, and as a result God is free to pour out His perfect love without compromising His perfect holiness.

First, *our sins are forgiven*. Jesus paid for all sin for all time, so when we accept Him as our Savior, our sins are forgiven forever.

1 Peter 3:18 “For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God...” (NASB)

1 John 2:2 “He (*Jesus*) is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 5:18,19 “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ... not counting people’s sins against them...” (NIV)

Micah 7:18,19 “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression... You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.” (NIV)

Second, *we receive the righteousness of Christ*. Jesus led a perfect, holy life, and when we accept Him as our Savior, we are granted the very righteousness of Christ forever.

Romans 3:21,22 “But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known... This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe...” (NIV)

Romans 5:17-21 “... those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!... through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous... where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (NIV)

Remember the two difficult truths introduced in the previous chapter: Everyone sins and everyone falls short of God’s glory. God solved these two problems through the life and death of Jesus. Our sins are taken away and given to Christ (who died for them on the cross), and our sins are forgiven. We receive the righteousness of Christ (who lived a perfect life), and we no longer fall short. Grace solves the problem of sin by removing it from us and imputing it to Jesus. Grace solves the problem of mankind falling short by imputing Jesus’ own righteousness to us when we accept Him as our Savior.

2 Corinthians 5:21 “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf (*our sin is imputed to Jesus*), so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (*Jesus’ righteousness is imputed to us*).” (NASB)

1 Peter 2:24 “And He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin (*sin is taken away*) and live to righteousness (*righteousness is received*); for by His wounds you were healed.” (NASB)

Before salvation we were sinful and we fell short of the glory of God. After salvation sin has been washed away for all time and replaced with the righteousness of Christ, so that (through God’s grace) we no longer fall short. Our position in God’s eyes is reversed, and God is free to love humanity without compromising His holy character.

Before salvation:	Sinful	&	Unrighteous
After salvation:	Forgiven	&	Made Righteous

Psalm 51:1-7 “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin... Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.” (NIV)

Philippians 3:8-10 “More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord... so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection...” (NASB)

Faith not works.

Our eternal salvation is through faith in Jesus – a humble acceptance of God’s gift of grace. We do not earn our salvation through our own works or by living according to some earthly standard of what is “good.” To say otherwise is to become our own savior and to have no need for Christ.

Ephesians 2:8,9 “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (NASB)

Titus 3:5-7 “he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy... so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.” (NIV)

Romans 4:3-6 “What does Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness’... the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness. David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:” (NIV)

Galatians 2:16,21 “know that a person is not justified by the works of the law (*the Jewish law, more strict than any moral code we have today*), but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified... I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” (NIV)

You will find some debate in this area. There are those who believe that salvation must be earned through mankind’s good works, or by adhering to some moral code,

or by partaking in some type of sacrament. But the Bible is perfectly clear on this point. The previous verses state: *“By grace you have been saved through faith... not as a result of works... He saved us, not because of righteous things we have done, but because of His mercy... the one who does not work but trusts God... their faith is credited as righteousness... a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ... because by the works of the law no one will be justified... I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”* The Word of God could not be any more explicit.

There is a reason salvation is through faith alone: Mankind’s good works are ultimately not good enough to earn a place in heaven. This is the problem of humanity’s good falling short of the glory of God, a truth we have made one of the anchors of this study. On our very best day we could never be good enough to deserve to spend eternity with the God who created the heavens and the earth. But God realizes this and loves us anyway. That’s why He sent His Son!

Romans 3:10-23 “As it is written: ‘There is no one righteous, not even one... All have turned away...’ Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” (NIV)

Isaiah 64:6 “... all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment...” (NASB)

Psalms 76:4-7 “You are resplendent, more majestic than the mountains... You, even You, are to be feared; and who may stand in Your presence...?” (NASB)

Psalms 143:2 “... in Your sight no man living is righteous.” (NASB)

Romans 5:8 “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (NIV)

Ephesians 2:1-5 “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world... we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),” (NASB)

This idea that we could never earn our way into heaven contradicts popular thinking. We are compelled to believe that if we do our best to be a good person, ultimately we will be accepted by God (or whatever higher power exists) after we die. Indeed, if we take all the religions in the world other than Christianity and boil them down to their most basic teachings, what we wind up with is something to the effect of: “Be good (according to each religion’s definition of ‘good’), and if you are good enough, then whatever happens when we die... you’ll be ok; that is, you’ll go to heaven, reach Nirvana, be reincarnated at a higher level, etc.”

The Bible is unique in that it holds that when it's all said and done, we can never be good enough to earn our way into heaven, because God is holy and we are not. But God recognizes this problem, and because He loves us He sent His Son – to pay the penalty for our sins and to give us a righteousness we could never attain on our own. Then our good works come into play, not as a means of earning our eternal salvation, but rather as an expression of gratitude for what God has already done for us, and as a way to live our lives in response to His grace. Good works (which have a definite place in the life God desires for us) become a natural *result of spiritual growth*, instead of a *means to earn our salvation*. We follow Jesus' example, not to *save* ourselves, but rather to *serve* our Lord, and in so doing, to know Joy and Peace.

Ephesians 4:1-13 “... live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love... equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”
(NIV)

Jeremiah 15:19 “... If you repent, I (*God*) will restore you that you may serve me...”
(NIV)

The biblical view takes a lot of humility to accept. Human nature wants to believe that if we try really hard and do our best, we'll be all right no matter what awaits us after death. God couldn't be so hard-hearted as to deny us if we give life our best shot.

The problem with this way of thinking is that it goes against everything God reveals about Himself in scripture. It directly contradicts who God declares Himself to be, and who (if we look at ourselves with a humble heart) deep down inside we know ourselves to be.

God declares Himself to be absolutely and infinitely holy, and our sin is utterly repugnant to Him, while our good works fall utterly short. In our heart-of-hearts, we know ourselves to be sinful and unable to earn a place in God's kingdom. And so we must conclude that our good works are simply not enough to deserve the privilege of living forever with the Creator of the Universe, and without the grace of God there can be no reconciliation between God and man.

Psalms 8:1-4 “O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth, who have displayed Your splendor above the heavens!... When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained; what is man...?” (NASB)

1 Samuel 6:20 “... Who can stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God?...”
(NIV)

Revelation 15:4 “... For you alone are holy...” (NIV)

Habakkuk 1:12,13 “LORD... My God, my Holy One... Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing.” (NIV)

Isaiah 1:13-19 “... I cannot endure iniquity... Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean... though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool. If you consent and obey...” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 5:18,19 “Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ... God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them...” (NASB)

Colossians 1:19-20 “For God was pleased... through him (*Jesus*) to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” (NIV)

The belief that we could earn our salvation ultimately requires *a high opinion of ourselves* and *a low opinion of God*. We have to believe that, although God is certainly holy, He is not *infinitely* holy. He is not so holy as to be unapproachable through our own righteous acts. And while it is true we sin and we fall somewhat short of God’s glory, we do not fall *utterly* short. The distance between God and mankind is not so great that it cannot be bridged if mankind reaches up and God reaches down. Surely God loves us enough to meet us in the middle. And why should anyone have to pay the penalty for sin anyway? Can’t God just forgive, without the need for some kind of barbaric, bloody sacrifice?

This reasoning is widespread throughout the world, but its fatal flaw is that God has gone to great lengths to make it perfectly clear His holiness is not something *relative*. It is *absolute*. We can’t compare our holiness to God’s holiness and try somehow to reconcile the two. God’s holiness is literally incomparable, and therefore irreconcilable with anything through compromise. As a result, throughout the scriptures the holy God refuses to brook any evil, and His absolute justice requires a sacrifice to atone for sin. See Leviticus 17:11; Exodus 12:12,13; Exodus 24:1-8; Leviticus 1-6; Hebrews 10:4-14.

However, if we set aside these unequivocal scriptures, emphasize God’s love and ignore His holiness, or even diminish His holiness to something other than pure, absolute holiness, then grace is not required. God could lower His standards, just a little bit so as not to be so unyielding, and then attempt to draw some sort of line, where if an individual attains a certain level of righteousness, he or she is saved. Or God could just abandon altogether the entire concept of a salvation earned by good works and accept everyone: The good, the evil, and everybody in between.

But then God would not be God – not the God revealed in the Bible, and not the God a humble heart senses when we seek the Creator of the universe. God would be something less. He would be a being compelled daily to compromise and act with expediency, more politician than holy, sovereign Lord. There would be no justice, no fairness, and nothing certain to depend upon, just endless plea-bargaining as we try to

convince God we've been good enough to enter His kingdom. Or in the end God could just give up trying to draw a line between those who made the grade and those who didn't, and in an act that makes human history utterly meaningless, include everyone.

But this is not the God who created us and who speaks to our hearts when we listen for His voice. God declares Himself to be infinitely holy, and rather than compromise the purity of His character, He set His plan of grace into motion so we can know the pure love of the holy God through the work of His Son. And as we shall see as we progress through this study, that is infinitely better than anything a god of expediency or compromise could ever provide.

Jude 24,25 "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen." (NASB)

Ephesians 3:20-21 "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen." (NIV)

Think of the challenge of earning salvation through good works as a challenge to swim from Los Angeles, California to Sydney, Australia. Some people are better swimmers than others, just as some people live better lives than others. One person might make it a mile from shore, another ten miles from shore, but no one would make it to the other continent.

In the same way, one person lives a good life and another person lives a better life, but no one lives a perfect life, and make no mistake about it, that is what the holy God would require if salvation depended upon our good works. We all fall short of the glory of God, just as each swimmer would fall short of the foreign shore. And truth be told, the distance between the glory of man and the glory of God is infinitely greater than the distance between the shores of any two continents.

But God is pure love, just as He is pure holiness, and His grace takes us to where we could never go through our own efforts. God doesn't require us to earn something we are incapable of, just as He would never require us to dogpaddle an impossible distance. He only requires that we choose to receive His grace.

But that demands *humility* from us. We have to accept that we could never earn a place in God's kingdom on our own, and we have to acknowledge the greatness of the glory of the living God. We do not call upon Him to diminish Himself, moderate His holiness, and come down to our level. He calls us up to His level. Indeed, He carries us up to His heights, by forgiving our sins and granting us the righteousness of

His perfect Son. Then through this grace we can receive in full the pure, unadulterated love of the holy God of the universe.

Romans 5:1-5 “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God... and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts...” (NASB)

Psalms 30:1-12 “I will exalt you, LORD, for you lifted me out of the depths... I called to you for help, and you healed me... To you, LORD, I called; to the Lord I cried for mercy... You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. LORD my God, I will praise you forever.” (NIV)

1 Peter 5:6 “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up...” (NIV)

When we reject the gift of grace and attempt to earn our own salvation, we do so because, at the end of the day, we do not want a Savior. We want to be our own savior. We honestly believe that our good works are impressive enough to earn a place in the eternal home of the God of all creation. In a world where the glory of God cries out to us from the things God has made, and where the depravity of man bleeds from the front page of every newspaper, this is the epitome of arrogance and conceit.

Psalms 36:1-3 “Transgression speaks to the ungodly within his heart; there is no fear of God before his eyes. For it flatters him in his own eyes concerning the discovery of his iniquity and the hatred of it. The words of his mouth are wickedness and deceit; he has ceased to be wise...” (NASB)

Jeremiah 8:5-17 “Why then have these people turned away?... They cling to deceit; they refuse to return. I have listened attentively, but they do not say what is right. None of them repent of their wickedness, saying, ‘What have I done?’ Each pursues their own course like a horse charging into battle... Since they have rejected the word of the LORD, what kind of wisdom do they have?... They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. ‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace. Are they ashamed of their detestable conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush. So they will fall among the fallen; they will be brought down when they are punished, says the LORD... ‘See, I will send venomous snakes among you, vipers that cannot be charmed, and they will bite you,’ declares the LORD.” (NIV)

Romans 1:18-32 “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as

God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions... receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.” (NASB)

Ephesians 4:18,19 “They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Obadiah 1:3,4 “The arrogance of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rock, in the loftiness of your dwelling place, who say in your heart, “Who will bring me down to earth?” Though you build high like the eagle, though you set your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down,’ declares the Lord.” (NASB)

Get away from the city and all things created by man, and consider the things created by God. Look at the sunrise in the morning and the stars at night. Listen to the wind in the trees and the waves on the shore. Breathe in the fragrance of a single flower or a forest full of pine. Then consider the One who created all these things.

Psalm 19:1-6 “The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their utterances to the end of the world... and there is nothing hidden from its heat.” (NASB)

Psalm 97:6 “The heavens declare His righteousness, and all the peoples have seen His glory.” (NASB)

Next, look inside yourself. Really look at yourself. Examine your thoughts, words, and deeds, and the motivations of your heart. Ask God to reveal Himself to you, and to help you look objectively at yourself. Then imagine standing before the Creator of the universe when you die and saying: “Here I am Lord. Consider the

greatness of my life. Now welcome me into your kingdom.” To a humble heart, the mere thought of that encounter is terrifying, and it is exactly what awaits each of us if we are without Christ.

John 3:17-21 “For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him... This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.” (NASB)

2 Thessalonians 2:10 “... They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.” (NIV)

Romans 14:10-12 “For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat... then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.” (NIV)

John 14:6 “Jesus answered, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’ ” (NIV)

Acts 4:12 “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.” (NIV)

Philippians 2:9-11 “Therefore God exalted him (*Jesus*) to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (NIV)

But with Jesus as our Savior, the inevitability of death is not a source of fear, but rather a source of comfort, hope, and even exhilaration. Like it or not, death is the final destination of every person. For those with Christ at their side, it is the end of all earthly struggles and the beginning of all eternal wonders, which have been carefully prepared by God for all those who will receive His grace.

Ecclesiastes 7:2 “... death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart.” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 6:1,2 “... we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain... behold, now is ‘THE DAY OF SALVATION’ ” (NASB)

Hebrews 4:7 “... just as has been said before, ‘TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS.’ ” (NASB)

John 1:12 “Yet to all who did receive him (*Jesus as Savior*), to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (NIV)

John 11:25 “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;’ ” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 15:50-58 “... for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality... then will come about the saying that is written, ‘DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP IN VICTORY. O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?’... thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore,

my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.” (NASB)
1 Corinthians 2:9 “but just as it is written, “THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.” (NASB)

Never too sinful and never too late.

There are many different aspects of salvation, and we’ve only scratched the surface of all that Jesus accomplished on the cross. However, an exhaustive study of salvation is not the focus of this work, and so we should move along. But before we do, let’s emphasize two remarkable things about grace: There is *no one* God will not forgive, and it is *never* too late to accept the gift of salvation.

There are some who might believe their sins are so great God could never forgive them. *Nothing could be further from the truth!* Some of the greatest believers in the Bible began their lives as terrible human beings. The Apostle Paul is an excellent example. Paul began his life as an extraordinarily judgmental and self-righteous religious leader who persecuted Christians for their faith. Under Paul’s direction, believers were beaten, imprisoned, and even killed. But when Paul was confronted with the truth about Jesus, he made a decision to change. He set aside guilty feelings about his sins and received the love God so greatly wanted to give him, and as a result God used him to write much of the New Testament.

Acts 8:1-3 “Saul (*Paul’s name before his conversion*) was in hearty agreement with putting him (*Steven*) to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church... Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.” (NASB)

Acts 26:9-11 “I (*Paul*) too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord’s people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities.” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 15:9,10 “For I (*Paul*) am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect...” (NIV)

1 Timothy 1:15,16 “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I (*Paul*) am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.” (NIV)

One of the great things about the Bible is that the men and women described in its pages are just like you and me. They made the same stupid mistakes we make, and some committed horrible sins and even crimes. Abraham was unfaithful to his wife. (Genesis 16.) Moses murdered an Egyptian. (Exodus 2.) David committed adultery and murder. (2 Samuel 11.) Peter denied Christ three times within a few hours of swearing that he would never leave Him. (Matthew 26.) But these were also some of the greatest men in history, because after their failure they ran *to* God, not *away* from Him, and found God's arms open wide to forgive and renew. God does not love them more than He loves us, and He will receive us with the same joy if we will turn to Him! Then, God can do great things in our lives, just as He did great things in the lives of Abraham, Moses, David, and Peter. The greater your sins, the closer you should feel to Christ, because He loved you enough to die for those sins!

Psalm 86:5 "You, Lord, are forgiving and good, abounding in love to all who call to you." (NIV)

Ezekiel 18:21-32 "But if the wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed... All his transgressions which he has committed will not be remembered against him... Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not right.' Hear now... Is it not your ways that are not right?... Cast away from you all your transgressions which you have committed and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!... 'For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies,' declares the Lord GOD. 'Therefore, repent and live.' " (NASB)

Matthew 9:10-13 "Then it happened that as Jesus was reclining at the table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, 'Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?' But when Jesus heard this, He said, 'It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: "I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE," for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.' " (NASB)

Matthew 21:28-32 "What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' 'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted? 'The first,' they *(the chief priests and elders)* answered. Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.' " (NIV)

Luke 15:7 "I *(Jesus)* tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." (NIV)

2 Corinthians 5:17 "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come." (NASB)

Isaiah 44:22 “I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you.” (NIV)

Similarly, it's never too late to accept the gift of salvation. Even with our dying breath we can receive Jesus as Savior. The thief on the cross is a great example of this. When Jesus was being put to death, He was crucified between two thieves. Both thieves taunted Jesus during the early morning hours, but as their deaths drew near, one thief asked Jesus to save him, and Jesus replied “today you shall be with Me in Paradise.” Luke 23:39-43.

It is certainly not God's will for us to wait until we are about to die to come to Him (then we will miss out on all the great things God had planned for us in this life), and we do not know when death will take us, so it is unbelievably foolish to delay even for one moment to receive the gift of salvation. But the comforting thing for all of us to know is this: God's love is so great, and Jesus' work on the cross is so complete, as long as we have breath in our body we can come to Him and find grace.

Ecclesiastes 9:4 “Anyone who is among the living has hope...” (NIV)

Isaiah 55:6,7 “Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.” (NIV)

Psalms 103:8-18 “The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love... he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children – with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.” (NIV)

Psalms 25:6-11 “Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love... Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you, LORD, are good. Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful toward those who keep the demands of his covenant. For the sake of your name, LORD, forgive my iniquity, though it is great.” (NIV)

2 Peter 3:9 “The Lord is... patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (NIV)

John 6:40 “For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life...” (NASB)

Psalm 32:1-11 “Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered...and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.’ And you forgave the guilt of my sin. Therefore let all the faithful pray to you while you may be found... Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD’S unfailing love surrounds the one who trusts in him. Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!” (NIV)

The mediator between God and mankind.

Jesus established grace. He is therefore the mediator between God and man, who makes a loving relationship between the holy God and fallen mankind possible. Jesus takes away our sin and lends us His righteousness forever, freeing God to pour out His love upon a creation that sins and falls short. Jesus shows us how to live, not just through His words, but even more importantly through His deeds, so when we follow His example, we find God’s purpose for our lives and the Joy and Peace God intends for each and every one of us.

John 15:11 “These things I (*Jesus*) have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.” (NASB)

John 16:33 “These things I (*Jesus*) have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.” (NASB)

We see God when we look into the face of Christ, and behold all God is, all God has done on our behalf, and all God purposes for our lives. God sees us through the eyes of the One who died for us and made us righteous. Through Christ, a fallen creation can return to a holy Creator and find love.

1 Timothy 2:5,6 “For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people...” (NIV)

If grace is the means through which the human race is reconciled to God, where can we go to learn of this all-important gift? Nothing could be more precious, so how is it made known to mankind? Where is grace revealed?

GOD’S WORD IS THE INSTRUMENT THROUGH WHICH GRACE IS REVEALED.

Our nourishment and light.

The grace of God is revealed in the Word of God. The Word of God is set forth in the Bible. The Bible (in its original languages – be careful of poor translations) is the infallible revelation of God to mankind in written form. God has given us His Word so we can come to understand Him, understand ourselves, and live lives that will bring glory to Him, light to the world, and Joy and Peace to us.

2 Peter 1:2-4 “Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature...” (NASB)

Romans 15:4 “For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” (NASB)

Hebrews 4:12 “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (NASB)

2 Timothy 3:16,17 “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” (NASB)

2 Timothy 2:15 “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.” (NASB)

God’s Word is the nourishment we need in order to grow into the men and women God wants us to be. It’s the sustenance of the spiritually healthy man and woman.

1 Peter 2:2 “like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow...” (NASB)

2 Peter 3:18 “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ...” (NIV)

1 Timothy 4:6 “... be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine...” (NASB)

God’s Word is light in the darkness. It’s what illuminates the emptiness of the fallen world and allows us to find the path that leads to God.

Psalm 119:105-111 “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.... Your statutes are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart.” (NIV)

Psalm 36:9 “... in your light we see light.” (NIV)

2 Peter 1:19 “So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts.” (NASB)

Apart from the light of God's Word, we are left to grow in a void. We feed in the darkness upon lies and half-truths. We never grow into the spiritually mature men and women God designed us to be. Instead, we become starved and stunted, deformed from spiritual malnourishment like the victims of famine. We eek out a petty existence, living in futility on pride and arrogance.

John 3:19,20 "... the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed." (NASB)

Romans 1:20-25 "... they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man... they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator..." (NASB)

1 Corinthians 4:6 "... learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant..." (NASB)

James 1:21 "Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls." (NASB)

Isaiah 66:1,2 "Thus says the LORD, 'Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool... For My hand made all these things, thus all these things came into being... But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word.'" (NASB)

Our rule and standard.

Everything we believe should be held up and tested against the light of God's Word. It is the rule and standard by which we should measure every thought and dream. Anything in opposition to the Word should be cast aside, like spoiled milk or rancid meat.

Proverbs 30:5,6 "Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar." (NIV)

Psalms 119:9-162 "How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Your word... Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You... Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your law... Strengthen me according to Your word... I shall run the way of Your commandments, for You will enlarge my heart... Teach me good discernment and knowledge, for I believe in Your commandments... The law of Your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces... How sweet are Your words to my taste! Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth! From Your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way. Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path... You are my hiding place

and my shield; I wait for Your word. Depart from me, evildoers, that I may observe the commandments of my God... The unfolding of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple... Establish my footsteps in Your word, and do not let any iniquity have dominion over me... My eyes anticipate the night watches, that I may meditate on Your word... The sum of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous ordinances is everlasting... my heart stands in awe of Your words. I rejoice at Your word, as one who finds great spoil..." (NASB)

Psalm 73:24-26 "With Your counsel You will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." (NASB)

Verses from the Bible appear in bold throughout this study. They are there to ensure that everything you read is supported directly by scripture. *Pay attention to what's in bold!* Only the words in bold, the quotations from the Bible, are the priceless Word of God. The comments between the verses are only meant to help you discover the real treasure, the grace revealed in the Word of the living God.

John 6:63 "... the words that I (*Jesus*) have spoken to you are spirit and are life." (NASB)

Jeremiah 15:16 "... Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart..." (NASB)

The world's objections.

There are a couple of objections commonly heard when we treat the Bible as the infallible Word of God. Often, someone will say: "How can you rely so much on a book that was written 2000 years ago? What relevance can an ancient text have in a modern world?" The response to that is easy: *Truth has no expiration date.* It's not a can of green beans that can go bad in your cupboard. What was true 2000 years ago was also true 2 billion years ago and will remain equally true for all eternity. Spiritual truth does not change with time. It is constant, because the God who revealed it is constant.

1 Peter 1:23-25 "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For, 'all people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever... ' " (NIV)

Psalm 119:89 "Your word, LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens." (NIV)

James 1:17 "Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow." (NASB)

Another objection is that the Bible was written by men, who are fallible, prone to error, and tempted to craft fictional accounts solely for the purpose of furthering their cause. But the Bible declares that the Spirit of God guided the men who wrote the scriptures. God's Spirit inspired the authors to write, such that the words flowing from their pens were not truly their own, but rather the words of the God who stirred their hearts.

2 Peter 1:20,21 “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” (NIV)

2 Timothy 3:16 “All Scripture is inspired by God...” (NASB)

Acts 28:25 “... The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your ancestors when he said through Isaiah the prophet:” (NIV)

“Apologetics” is a term for the defense of the Christian faith, including the authority and reliability of the scriptures. It is not the purpose of this study to provide a detailed review of Apologetics. However, many excellent works have been written on the subject and are available if this is an area of interest for you.

Apart from the books written to methodically demonstrate the trustworthiness of the Bible, perhaps the most potent defense of the scriptures is the raw power of the Word of God on a humble human heart. When an objective, open mind reads the Bible, it is bathed in truth, light, and hope. Then as we choose to live by the truths the Bible contains, our hearts are changed forever, so we can know Joy and Peace in a fallen world. And it is this transformation within us that provides our greatest assurance the Word of God is true. A biased, closed mind remains in the dark, like a fearful man in a room with the curtains drawn, who never discovers the sun shining outside his windows.

Ephesians 1:18,19 “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe...” (NIV)

Psalms 25:14 “The LORD confides in those who fear him...” (NIV)

Proverbs 18:2 “Fools find no pleasure in understanding but delight in airing their own opinions.” (NIV)

2 Timothy 4:3,4 “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.” (NASB)

Grace is established by the Son. Grace is revealed in the Word. But how do we receive this gift? How is it granted to us? Human beings are so weak and fragile.

Where do we go to find the wisdom and strength we need to allow the grace of God to transform our lives? How is grace imparted?

GOD'S SPIRIT IS THE INSTRUMENT THROUGH WHICH GRACE IS IMPARTED.

Who the Spirit is.

It is the Spirit of God, sometimes called the "Holy Spirit," who takes the grace of God and makes it resonate in our lives. The Son *established* grace, by His perfect life and saving work on the cross. The Word *reveals* grace, by its perfect recordation of the love of God for all creation. The Spirit *imparts* grace to those of us who choose to heed the call of God and receive His love.

Who is the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is God. He shares all the characteristics of the essence of God the Father (and God the Son), such as sovereignty, righteousness, justice, love, eternal life, omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, immutability, and truthfulness. Just as Jesus is God in the flesh, the Holy Spirit is God in the spirit.

2 Corinthians 3:17,18 "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we... are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (NIV)

What the Spirit does.

How does the Holy Spirit impart grace? As a starting point, God's Spirit convicts us of our need for grace. It is the Spirit of God who speaks to our hearts, convincing us of our sin and our need for a Savior.

John 16:8 "And He (*the Holy Spirit*)... will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment;" (NASB)

God's Spirit also helps us understand the plan of grace and how Jesus died for our sins on the cross so we could be saved.

1 Corinthians 2:10-12 "... The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God... we have received... the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us." (NIV)

Then, if we will accept Jesus as Savior, God's Spirit comes to live inside us. We are indwelt by the very spirit of God! This has extraordinary, tremendous ramifications both in this life and in eternity.

Romans 8:11 "... He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you." (NASB)

2 Corinthians 6:16 “... For we are the temple of the living God...” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 6:19,20 “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.” (NIV)

From the eternal perspective: Our seal of salvation and life.

From an eternal perspective, the indwelling Holy Spirit “seals” us, ensuring our salvation and granting us eternal life; that is, the unbreakable promise that we will spend eternity with God in heaven after we die. This is how, through the Spirit, God cares for us in eternity.

Ephesians 1:13,14 “... When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance.” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 1:21,22 “Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.” (NIV)

Galatians 6:8 “... the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.” (NASB)

From the temporal perspective: Our source of understanding, wisdom, and strength.

From a temporal perspective (that is, during this life), God’s Spirit lives inside us to grant us three basic things: *understanding, wisdom, and strength*. This is how, through the Spirit, God cares for us in time.

John 14:16,17 “I (*Jesus*) will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth... He abides with you and will be in you.” (NASB)

Understanding is the ability to learn God’s Word. As we have seen, God’s Word is the standard by which we are to live our lives. Everything God wants us to know about Him, ourselves, and the relationship between God and mankind is revealed in the Word. Therefore, part of the role of the Spirit of God is to help us learn and understand the Word of God.

John 16:13 “But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth...” (NIV)

John 14:26 “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit... will teach you all things...” (NASB)

However, it’s not enough to have only an academic understanding of God’s Word. We must also be able to take God’s Word and apply it to our lives, so we know the choices God would have us make at any given turn. The Holy Spirit therefore also

gives us *wisdom*, the ability to properly apply God's Word to our changing circumstances, so we can live our lives in a way that is pleasing to Him.

John 14:26 "... He (*the Holy Spirit*) will... bring to your remembrance all that I (*Jesus*) said to you." (NASB)

Psalm 51:6 "Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being (*understanding of God's Word*), and in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom (*the ability to apply God's Word to our changing circumstances*)." (NASB)

Isaiah 11:2 "The Spirit of the LORD... the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might..." (NIV)

Proverbs 2:3-11 "indeed, if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will... find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding... Then you will understand what is right and just and fair – every good path. For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you." (NIV)

Finally, God's Spirit lends us *strength*, the ability to do what God's Word commands. Just as it is not enough to simply understand God's Word, it is also not enough to wisely apply God's Word. In order to fulfill God's plan for our lives (and in so doing, know the Joy and Peace that He intends for us), we have to *do* what God's Word calls us to do. And so, the Spirit of God gives us the strength to live by the Word of God, if that is our desire.

Acts 1:8 "... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes..." (NIV)

Galatians 5:16-23 "... walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control..." (NASB)

Ephesians 3:16 "... be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man;" (NASB)

Romans 8:26 "... the Spirit helps us in our weakness..." (NIV)

We can use a computer analogy to better understand how we interact with God's Word and God's Spirit. We are the hardware; the Word is the software; and the Spirit is the power source, electricity. Without God's Word, we are like a computer, plugged in and running, but without software to tell us how to operate. Without the Spirit, we are like a computer with the best software money can buy, but without the power to run the program. And without us, the Word and the Spirit are like software sitting next to an electrical outlet, with nothing to make use of the knowledge and power. But when we choose to learn and live by God's Word through the power God's Spirit provides, we are able to meet the challenges of each and every circumstance of life, the way a functioning computer is able to make sense of the data input into it and successfully run the program.

Philippians 4:11-20 “I (*Paul*) have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me... And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen.” (NASB)

The Trinity.

In this chapter we’ve seen God described as a Father, Son, and Spirit. This is sometimes referred to as the “Trinity;” the three personalities through which God reveals Himself to humanity. The Trinity can be somewhat difficult to understand, just as the hypostatic union (the simultaneous deity and humanity of Jesus) can be difficult to understand, and so we should take a moment and explore this idea before we move on.

The scriptures are very clear: There is only one God. There are not many different gods, nor do the scriptures describe three separate and distinct gods who comprise the Trinity.

Deuteronomy 6:4 “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” (NIV)

1 Timothy 2:5 “For there is one God...” (NIV)

Malachi 2:10 “... Did not one God create us?...” (NIV)

Romans 3:30 “since indeed God... is one.” (NASB)

When we look within the pages of the scriptures, we also find that the one God of the universe has revealed Himself to us through three distinct and different personalities: a Father, a Son, and a Spirit, each of whom serve a different function in the divine plan.

God the Father. The Father is the author of the divine plan for all creation. As a result, He has authority over all creation.

Ephesians 4:6 “one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” (NIV)

John 14:24 “... the word you hear is not Mine (*Jesus*’), but the Father’s who sent Me.” (NASB)

Galatians 1:4 “... (*Jesus*) gave Himself for our sins... according to the will of our God and Father,” (NIV)

God the Son. The Son, Jesus Christ, executes the divine plan. He carries out the will of God the Father.

John 4:34 “Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His work.’” (NASB)

John 6:38 “For I (*Jesus*) have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.” (NASB)

Colossians 1:16-20 “For by Him (*Jesus*) all things were created... For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself...” (NASB)

God the Spirit. The Holy Spirit, in conjunction with God’s Word, reveals the divine plan and then gives us the wisdom and strength to live by it. The Spirit’s role is to enable us to understand God’s Word, apply it to our lives, and do what it says.

1 Corinthians 2:12 “... we have received... the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us.” (NIV)

Isaiah 11:2 “The Spirit of the LORD... the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might...” (NIV)

Ephesians 3:16 “... be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man;” (NASB)

The three members of the Trinity are coequal. No one member is greater than the others, because they all share the same essence (i.e., sovereignty, righteousness, justice, love, omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, truthfulness, immutability, and eternal life).

John 10:30 “I (*Jesus*) and the Father are one.” (NIV)

Colossians 2:9 “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 3:17 “Now the Lord is the Spirit...” (NIV)

The existence of the Trinity is affirmed by the use of the plural pronoun “Us” for God in Genesis 1:26, 3:22, and 11:7, and is also declared in the following scriptures:

Matthew 28:19 “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” (NIV)

1 Peter 1:1,2 “To God’s elect... who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood:” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 13:14 “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” (NIV)

Here’s an analogy that can help us understand the Trinity: God’s singular nature manifests itself in three different personalities the same way water may manifest itself in three personalities. Water has one nature or essence, H₂O (two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom), but it may be either a solid (ice), a liquid (water), or a gas (steam). Yet at the same time, they are all the same thing. In the same way, God may be revealed as Father, Son, or Spirit, and still be the same person.

The Trinity serves as God's tool to describe His *infinite* characteristics and perfect plan of grace to the *finite* minds of men. God presents Himself as three persons serving different functions for our benefit, to make it easier for us to understand His eternal design and purpose.

God the Father is the author of grace. It is His plan for the blessing of all creation. God the Son established grace. He carried out the plan of the Father through His perfect life and saving work on the cross. The Word of God reveals grace. It illuminates in perfect detail the Father's plan as carried out by the Son. The Spirit of God imparts grace. He calls out to us, ready to cover us like a seal with the unbreakable promise of eternal life, and ready to dwell within us to supply the understanding, wisdom, and strength we need in order to live out the plan of God for our lives.

How then, can we describe this grace that has been shown to us?

GRACE IS THE GENTLE WHISPER OF GOD THAT OFFERS EACH OF US LIFE, FILLED WITH JOY AND PEACE.

The only path to our hearts' desires.

In some ways, grace is like a whisper. The most powerful words imaginable can be contained in a whisper, but we have to be quiet to hear them. We have to stop what we are doing, end our own speechmaking, and heed the voice of God. We have to tune out everything else around us and concentrate on the tiniest of sound. And we have to humbly recognize that what is being whispered is far more important than all we are carrying on about. We have to want to hear a whisper.

In a similar way, in order to obtain grace we must stand down and stop trying to earn it. Rather than continually strive to build up a lifetime of good works worthy of the prize of heaven, we must simply accept it. We must quiet our labors, or we will drown out the majesty of all God has already accomplished on our behalf. The struggle must be set aside and the gift must be received. And we must humbly recognize that the price of grace is far beyond anything our righteous deeds could ever afford. We have to want to receive grace.

As we continue on throughout this study, we will discover that grace is the one path to Joy and Peace, and consequently, the biblical concept of "life." We are still laying the groundwork necessary in order to understand what the Joy and Peace God intends for us truly is. For now, understand this: The *only* road to Joy and Peace is the grace of God, but once we walk its narrow path, then we will finally take hold of the "life that is truly life," the "abundant life" God longs for each of us to know right

here, right now, in this fallen world, and which will be revealed in all its fullness in the eternal life that is to come.

John 14:6 “Jesus answered, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’” (NIV)

Matthew 7:13,14 “... wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” (NIV)

1 Timothy 6:17-19 “Command *(them)*... to put their hope in God... to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.” (NIV)

John 10:10 “... I *(Jesus)* came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (NASB)

When we come to understand the fullness of the scriptures, we discover that, through grace, a holy, loving Creator offers forgiveness, reconciliation, purpose, power, and hope to a sinful, helpless creation. What then, is our response to this grace?

FREEWILL ALLOWS MANKIND TO CHOOSE WHETHER TO RECEIVE OR REJECT GOD’S GRACE.

A God to be terrified of or adored?

Our response to grace is: Whatever we want it to be. We can embrace the grace of God or turn from it, and it is this foundational choice that determines the course of our lives. Almighty God has given fallen mankind freedom to choose its destiny. This is the great drama that unfolds throughout human history.

The nature and extent of mankind’s freewill have been debated throughout the ages. Some have taken a fatalistic approach, denying the existence of freewill and claiming instead that all of our choices have been made for us by God. We are in some fashion pre-programmed to make decisions we mistakenly believe are our own. Others hold to a limited freewill, where we have partial freedom over only certain decisions.

But freewill is by its very nature absolute. We are either free to choose or we are not. There can be no in-between. And if we take the fatalistic approach to its logical conclusion, the ramifications are *unthinkable*. If God chooses our destiny for us (most importantly, who goes to heaven and who goes to hell), then He is not the holy, loving God revealed in the scriptures. He is the most cruel, sadistic being ever conceived by the mind of man.

Think of a father who has two children. For no good reason whatsoever, he lavishes one child with all good things, and the other he keeps alone in a basement to suffer in

absolute darkness. We would rightly call a man like that evil or insane and immediately bring him to justice.

Other people mistakenly call him God. Except that instead of being so unspeakably unfair with two children, he is unspeakably unfair with billions of them. If we do not choose our own eternal destiny, then God does, and that means God created billions of people specifically for the purpose of enjoying heaven, and billions of people specifically for the purpose of suffering hell, for all eternity. This is not a god to be worshiped and adored, but a god of whom to be terrified.

Thankfully, God is infinitely worthy of our worship and adoration, and indeed God has a plan and purpose for both human history and for each and every individual life. But the Bible reveals that God does not impose His will upon us. Rather, He offers us the choice to fulfill His purpose or pursue our own.

Omniscience, Foreknowledge, the Divine Decree, Election, and Predestination.

In order to understand how God's divine purpose and mankind's freewill interact, we need to look at the biblical concepts of Omniscience, Foreknowledge, the Divine Decree, Election, and Predestination. There is some confusion surrounding these concepts, but unnecessarily so, when we examine them in the light of what we already know about the holy, loving God.

Omniscience is one of the fundamental characteristics of God. It means God knows everything. And not only everything that was, is, or will be, but also what could have been.

Psalm 147:5 "... His understanding is infinite." (NASB)

1 John 3:20 "... for God... knows all things." (NASB)

Hebrews 4:13 "And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do." (NASB)

Foreknowledge means God knows beforehand all that will occur throughout human history. However, it does not mean God causes these things to happen. It simply means (as a result of God's Omniscience) God knows the decisions we will freely make before we choose to make them.

1 Peter 1:1,2 "... To God's elect... who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father..." (NIV)

Acts 2:23 "this Man (*Jesus*), delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God..." (NASB)

Matthew 6:8 "... your Father knows what you need before you ask him." (NIV)

God's Omniscience and Foreknowledge are related to another biblical doctrine, sometimes called the *Divine Decree*. At some point in eternity past, before the creation

of the universe or any of its inhabitants, God decided to create a universe inhabited by creatures with freewill. Through His Omniscience, God considered every possible combination of creature and environment, and considered what the outcome of each particular combination would be. He then decreed what would actually occur throughout history, while remaining true to His nature (each individual would be treated fairly) and while incorporating freewill (each individual would be able to choose whether to accept or reject His grace). This is known as the “Divine Decree,” and it is upon this decree the Foreknowledge of God is based.

Psalm 148:5,6 “Let them praise the name of the LORD, for at his command they were created, and he established them for ever and ever – he issued a decree that will never pass away.” (NIV)

Isaiah 46:9-11 “... I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure... I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it.’ ” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 2:7 “... we declare God’s wisdom... that God destined for our glory before time began.” (NIV)

Ephesians 1:4 “For he (*God*) chose us in him (*Jesus*) before the creation of the world...” (NIV)

God considered every possible different type of creature He could create, how each of these creatures as individuals would freely exercise their volition, and every possible environment He could place them in. He then looked at what the outcome of every possible combination would be, and finally chose one that would bring about His eternal purpose, while at the same time still allow His creation to freely choose to follow or reject Him.

The Divine Decree simply means God had the good sense to “think ahead” before creation. It also means God places people throughout history in appropriate circumstances so they may exercise their freewill without hindering His ability to be just to the rest of creation or to bring about the conclusion of history according to His predetermined plan.

Acts 17:26 “From one man he (*God*) made all the nations... and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.” (NIV)

Romans 9:17 “For the Scripture says... ‘FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH.’ ” (NASB)

Psalm 76:10 “For the wrath of man shall praise You...” (NIV)

Isaiah 25:1 “LORD, you are my God; I will exalt you and praise your name, for in perfect faithfulness you have done wonderful things, things planned long ago.” (NIV)

Isaiah 14:24-27 “The LORD Almighty has sworn, ‘Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will happen...’ This is the plan determined for the whole world; this is the hand stretched out over all nations. For the

LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?” (NIV)

Election flows from the Omniscience, Foreknowledge, and Divine Decree of God. It means God “elects” or chooses to bless certain individuals with certain blessings, based upon His Foreknowledge of how each individual will exercise his or her freewill.

1 Peter 1:1,2 “... To God’s elect... who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father...” (NIV)

Romans 8:33-39 “Who will bring a charge against God’s elect?... Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NASB)

Predestination is similar to Election. God has a predetermined plan and purpose for each individual’s life, based upon His Foreknowledge. God considered how we would exercise our freewill during our lifetime, then carefully placed us throughout history, making sure we are born at just the right time, in just the right place, so we can fulfill the purpose He had in mind when He chose to create us.

Romans 8:29 “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.” (NIV)

Ephesians 1:4-14 “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace... we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will... And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance...” (NIV)

In His Omniscience, God considered all possibilities. In His Sovereignty, God decreed one reality that would come to pass. This Divine Decree grants God Foreknowledge of all that will occur throughout human history. God’s Foreknowledge is the basis of His Election and Predestination of those who will choose to respond to His call. Through all this, God makes choices, but His choices are based upon His knowledge of how each individual will freely exercise his or her freewill. This ensures that the Creator is fair with His creation, and that God’s design remains in harmony with God’s holy nature.

The weave of history.

God is the great draftsman of human history, and He has a precise vision He has determined to accomplish. In so doing, He assembles all the pieces of the puzzle and places them in precisely the correct place throughout time. The pieces of the puzzle can be anything from a leaf floating on a breeze to the birth of a child. All have been set into motion so God's vision unfolds exactly according to His holy, loving plan.

What God does not do, however, is remove freedom of choice from the human element of His overall design. Part of the materials of His labor is the freewill of His creation. It's incorporated into, and an integral part of, the design. Indeed, it is what gives the design its beauty, and without it all meaning is drained from the work.

This does not imply that God does not steer the course of human history or individual lives. On the contrary, His hand is constantly guiding the fate of nations and the fate of you and me. But He does so in a manner that never interferes with the freedom each of us has been granted to choose to stray from His hand or cling to it tightly. The grandeur of God's design takes even our rebellion and weaves it throughout history to accomplish God's good pleasure, so that as the Psalmist declares, even "the wrath of man shall praise You." (Psalm 76:10.)

God has absolute control over the circumstances each individual encounters throughout his or her life, but He also grants us total freedom over how we respond to these circumstances, with choices for good or for evil. God then takes these choices like colored thread and weaves them into the fabric of time to accomplish His great vision for the tapestry of human history. And one day, when time is just a memory, all creation will be able to stand back, view the completed work, and see how each thread contributed to the whole, and finally understand the part each person played in the overall design of the Creator of the heavens and the earth.

Reasons for confusion.

These concepts of God's Omniscience, Foreknowledge, and Divine Decree, and the resulting Election and Predestination of humanity, can be difficult to get our arms around because (as with the doctrines of the hypostatic union and the Trinity) we are trying to comprehend with *finite* human minds how God wields His *infinite* knowledge and power. It's good fun to think about, but it can also strain our noggins.

Another reason we get confused is because we take individual verses from the Bible out of context. It's very easy to get off track when we look at a single verse in isolation. We must learn to look at the Bible as a whole, and consider each individual verse in the light of our overall understanding of the entirety of scripture.

The ninth chapter of Romans is a good example. These verses are often cited for the proposition that God chooses who is saved and who is lost without regard for the choices we make.

Romans 9:15-18 “For he (*God*) says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion’... Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.” (NIV)

If we look at this verse in isolation, it would seem to imply that mankind’s choices either don’t matter or are ultimately controlled by God. But if we consider the verse carefully, all it really says is that God makes sovereign choices (as is His right as the Creator of the universe). *What it does not declare is the basis upon which God makes these choices.* Just because a basis is not provided in a particular verse does not mean one does not exist. This leads to a false conclusion that God is somehow arbitrary or indiscriminant in how He deals out mercy. To learn the basis upon which God is merciful, all we have to do is *keep reading*. (This is a good rule of thumb whenever we get confused by a single scripture – keep reading!) In the very next chapter of Romans (and throughout God’s Word), we learn the criteria for receiving God’s grace: We simply call out to Him and ask for it.

Romans 10:11,12 “As Scripture says, ‘Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.’ For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ ” (NIV)

Luke 1:49-50 “... holy is his (*God’s*) name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.”

Verses such as Romans 9:15-18 that talk about God “hardening” individuals also confuse people. To begin with, we find verses in the Bible where men and women “harden” their own hearts against God (Psalm 95:8; Hebrews 3:8,15; Hebrews 4:7, Ephesians 4:18,19). They sense God’s voice calling out to them in various ways, but instead of responding to it, they intentionally refuse the call.

But we also find verses where God hardens the hearts of men and women (Exodus 4:21; Isaiah 63:17). In isolation, these verses seem to indicate God sometimes causes us to make certain decisions, but when read in context, that is really not what is going on. If you look at these verses closely, you’ll see that God is not *forcing choices* upon individuals, but instead *manipulating circumstances* that allow individuals to freely choose to make bad decisions on their own. Then through these bad decisions, God is able to both reveal truths about Himself and bring about His perfect plan. God will not *force* us to make a bad (or good) decision, but He will certainly *allow* us to make bad decisions if we can learn from them or help bring about God’s purpose.

Exodus 14:1-4 “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp near... the sea... Pharaoh will think, “The Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert.” And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD...’ ” (NIV)

The difference to note is that God exercises control over *circumstances* not *choices*. God manipulates things in order to arrange the playing field of human history to His liking, then allows people to choose, and uses the decisions we freely make to accomplish His design. This is the divine prerogative of the Creator of the Universe and everything in it. But understand that God never exercises this prerogative malevolently. You never see Him “hardening” the heart of someone who would otherwise accept His grace and follow Him. He would never do that, because He loves us too much. His ultimate purpose is always to bring about something good.

Psalms 145:1-21 “I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever... One generation commends your works to another... They celebrate your abundant goodness and joyfully sing of your righteousness. The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made... The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does. The LORD upholds all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down... You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing... The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them. The LORD watches over all who love him... My mouth will speak in praise of the LORD. Let every creature praise his holy name for ever and ever.” (NIV)

Jeremiah 29:11-13 “ ‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future... You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.’ ” (NIV)

It’s also very important to realize that God requires us to exercise some *common sense* when we interpret the Bible. The scriptures are bursting with examples of people being called upon to choose between good and evil. The first thing God did with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden was present them with a choice, whether to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:16,17). Jesus had a choice as to whether He went to the cross (Matthew 26:36-46). Every day we are confronted with hard choices, and we know from our own experience that we are free to make them as we please. How could we then turn around and question whether we have freewill?

Joshua 24:15 “... choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...” (NIV)

The vital place of freewill in God’s plan.

It's our freewill that makes a loving relationship with God possible. How could we have true fellowship with something incapable of making an independent choice? We can program a computer to say "I love you," but that would never satisfy our longing for companionship. In the same way, God could never be glorified by a creation pre-programmed to praise Him. God does not have to love us, but He chooses to love us. In a humble heart, this inspires love that is freely returned, and so Creator and creation delight in the exchange of love God designed for us to enjoy.

Isaiah 43:1-5 "But now, this is what the LORD says – he who created you... he who formed you... 'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior... Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you... Do not be afraid, for I am with you...'" (NIV)

Psalms 116:1-7 "I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live... The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion... when I was in great need, he saved me. Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the LORD has been good to you." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Without freewill, the entirety of human history is a meaningless exercise. It becomes a melodrama played out for the vanity of the author, with the notable exception that, for no good reason whatsoever, billions of players hit the jackpot while billions of others suffer cruelly. All are subject to the whims of the author, who becomes a saint or sadist, depending on the luck of the draw.

But when the players are free to make their own choices for good or for evil, then the drama becomes breathtaking. Even small decisions made by seemingly insignificant players become vitally important in the great spectacle of life. Human history takes on meaning, purpose, and eternal significance.

Both the scriptures and our hearts declare that the holy, loving God grants His creation freewill. He did so knowing full well we would fall, and some would choose to accept His grace and some would choose to reject it. The ramifications of this decision are staggering. It sets up the drama of human history, and provides a key to understanding the world in which we live.

Deuteronomy 30:19 "... I (*God*) have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live..." (NASB)

Chapter 4

UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD AROUND US

(LIFE IN A FALLEN WORLD)

WE FIND OURSELVES BORN INTO A FALLEN WORLD.

The dealing of the cards.

A baby is born into the world. One is healthy, another is sick. One is fed, another goes hungry. One is welcomed, another is rejected. One knows peace, another knows war. One finds love, another is alone. And on and on it goes. Our world is full of indescribable beauty and moments of complete transcendence. It is equally full of unspeakable horrors and moments of absolute despair.

On the surface, the dealing of the cards can seem frustratingly random. Why is one blessed and another cursed? Sometimes justice is served magnificently. Other times it is appallingly mocked. Opportunity goes to deserving people. It also leaves them in the dust, and visits the most unworthy people imaginable. Our world is fallen, and trying to make sense of it has kept the philosophers, poets, and comics busy for millennia.

The consequences of freewill.

Why is there evil in the world? The answer to this question is relatively straightforward: Freewill.* Evil is the natural and unavoidable byproduct of freewill. It inevitably follows from the existence of freewill that some will use it to do right, and others will use it to do wrong. The inescapable result is a world twisted and torn, struggling within the powerful grip of evil.

This is why God's decision to give humanity freewill is so dramatic. He did it knowing full well that evil would come into the world as a result. Innocent people would suffer; and if freewill is truly free, then evil people will prosper, at least temporarily, by exploiting the weak. And He did this knowing that no one would

* Why does a specific evil happen to a specific individual and not to others? This is a much more difficult question to answer, and one that we will reserve until later in this work. God's Word provides detailed answers to this question. We are just not quite ready for them yet. More groundwork needs to be laid, but be encouraged, there are answers to this question that are satisfying and full of hope.

suffer more cruelly from evil than His Son, Jesus, who would be rejected, beaten, and crucified, then sacrificed for the sin – that is, the evil – of the entire world.

The highest gift.

But granting mankind freewill is also the only way *good* could come into the world. Without freedom of choice, actions are meaningless. Our behavior becomes mindless obedience to irresistible demands. Good only comes when we freely choose to do the right, but often difficult, thing. In some ways, freewill is the highest gift a Creator could ever entrust to His creation, because it empowers us to bring both good and evil into the world He created for us.

The only way God could take evil out of the world is to take freewill out of the world, and along with it, the good. This He will not do. Like it or not, we will live out our lives in a fallen world. Our task, then, becomes finding a way to know Joy and Peace within it.

THE GREAT CHALLENGE OF EACH INDIVIDUAL LIFE IS: KNOWING JOY AND PEACE IN A FALLEN WORLD.

The last words of the Last Supper.

The night before Jesus was crucified, He gathered His disciples around Him and they shared the Passover meal together. This was Jesus' final night of fellowship with His disciples, before He was unjustly put to death, and it is commonly known as the "Last Supper." After the conclusion of the meal, Jesus took His disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray, and there Judas betrayed Jesus and turned Him over to a detachment of Roman soldiers and officials sent by the chief priests and Pharisees.

The Last Supper was Jesus' last few peaceful moments with His beloved disciples. He had trained them for three years to be the ones to take His message to the world after He was gone. What would He choose to speak to them about on this, their last night together? Shouldn't we take special care to heed these words?

Jesus spoke of many things during the Last Supper, which is recorded in the Gospel of John, Chapters 13 through 17. However, He concluded the meal with a prayerful discourse centered around His intense desire for His disciples to grow to experience the same Joy and Peace Jesus knew while living out His life in a fallen world.

Jesus knew better than anyone how unfair, cruel, and hateful this world can be. Jesus was fully aware that He was about to be betrayed, beaten mercilessly, spat upon, scourged with a whip, and nailed to a cross. He also knew His disciples would not stand beside Him for the ordeal. They would abandon Him.

Yet Jesus used His final moments with His disciples to speak of the Joy and Peace He has known *despite* the world, and to pray mightily that His disciples would know this elusive Joy and Peace as well. As we read Jesus' words in John 16 and 17, we can almost see the Joy shining in Jesus' eyes as He ministers to His disciples. We can sense the peace Jesus experiences as He prays for them. And Jesus knows this Joy "inexpressible" and Peace "surpassing comprehension" despite His knowledge that in just a few short hours, He would be abandoned by all, hanging on the cross of Calvary, paying the penalty for the sins of the world. How did He do it?

John 16:31 through 17:26 “ ‘Do you (*the disciples*) now believe?’ Jesus replied. ‘A time is coming and in fact has come when you will be scattered, each to your own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me. I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.’ After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: ‘Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you... I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I pray for them... I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one... I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world... My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me... Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.’” (NIV)

THE KEY TO KNOWING JOY AND PEACE WITHIN A FALLEN WORLD IS: RECEIVING GOD'S GRACE.

Lost souls or God's instruments?

Jesus knew true Joy and true Peace despite His knowledge that the cross, the most horrific ordeal in all of human history, was waiting for Him with the next sunrise. In His last moments with His disciples, Jesus prayed they too would come to know true Joy and Peace. And He prayed not only for His disciples, but also for you and me; that is, for those who would respond to the His message.

Jesus knew the great challenge in this life is knowing Joy and Peace within a fallen world, but He also knew God's grace is more than sufficient to meet this challenge. When we chose to receive God's grace, we develop a close, intimate relationship with God that creates within us a Joy and Peace stronger than the tumults of a fallen world. Grace was sufficient to sustain Jesus through the ordeal of the cross, and it is sufficient to sustain us through our lesser trials.

Hebrews 12:1-3 "... let us also lay aside every encumbrance... fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." (NASB)

2 Corinthians 12:5-10 "... I will not boast about myself (*Paul*), except about my weaknesses... to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong." (NIV)

2 Thessalonians 3:16 "Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance. The Lord be with you all!" (NASB)

Jesus' prayer reveals so much. He recognizes the world hates truth and those who stand for it. And so, within this fallen world we will inevitably have trouble. But despite this we can still know true Peace, because Jesus has overcome the world by establishing God's grace. Through the grace of God, we can know a Peace that transcends every trial and heartache of this fallen world.

Psalms 112:1-8 "... Blessed are those who fear the LORD... Even in darkness light dawns... They will have no fear of bad news; their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the LORD. Their hearts are secure, they will have no fear..." (NIV)

Isaiah 26:3,4 "The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect peace, because he trusts in You. Trust in the LORD forever, for in GOD the LORD, we have an everlasting Rock." (NASB)

Jesus also recognizes within His prayer that it is not God's will to remove us from the world, but rather for us to know Joy and Peace within it. And so He does not pray

for God to take us out of the world, but instead to protect us from evil, so God's love can grow within us and shine as a light in the darkness. The Joy and Peace we come to know as we grow in God's love illuminates the darkness of the fallen world, allowing us to serve the God who sustains us in our every need.

2 Corinthians 4:1-16 "... we do not lose heart... we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God... For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body... Therefore we do not lose heart..." (NIV)

Isaiah 42:5,6 "This is what God the LORD says – the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: 'I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you... a light...'" (NIV)

Throughout His prayer, Jesus does not even consider Himself or His followers to be a part of this world. He teaches us that we are not of the world, any more than He was of the world. This world we are born into is not our home. We spend a brief time on earth as strangers, given the opportunity to make choices to receive or reject the grace of God. In so doing, we play out our part in the great drama of human history, as either lost souls in a dying world or instruments in the hands of the living God.

1 Peter 1:1-17 "... To God's elect, strangers in the world... Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power... In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy... Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

1 Peter 2:9-23 "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light... Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war

against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us... For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men... To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

2 Timothy 2:21 “Those who cleanse themselves... will be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.” (NIV)

Romans 6:13 “... offer every part of yourself to him (*God*) as an instrument of righteousness.” (NIV)

GOD'S GRACE AND MANKIND'S FREEWILL ARE THE TWO GREAT THEMES THAT PLAY THROUGHOUT HUMAN HISTORY.

The voice and the heart.

The whole of human history is dominated by two great and mighty themes: The grace of the holy, loving Creator and the freewill of His creation. If we could see history laid out before us from the divine viewpoint of our Heavenly Father, the two common threads we would discover would be the voice of God calling out to His children, imploring them to receive His love, and the answers from each individual human heart, some responding to the call, some rejecting it.

The great drama of human history then becomes: Who will heed the voice of God and who will run from it? The Spirit of God calls out to us, from the earliest days of our youth to the very end of our lives. How mankind collectively responds to the voice of God shapes the fates of nations. How we as individuals respond to the voice of God determines whether we ultimately find Joy and Peace in a fallen world, and in so doing, the plan and purpose our Heavenly Father had in mind when He chose to create us.

Psalm 33:12-18 “Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD... No king is saved by the size of his army; no warrior escapes by his great strength. A horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength it cannot save. But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love,” (NIV)

Deuteronomy 30:19,20 “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the LORD your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days...” (NASB)

Hebrews 4:7 “... just as has been said before, ‘TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS.’” (NASB)

Revelation 3:20 “Behold, I (*Jesus*) stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.” (NASB)

Ephesians 1:18,19 “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe...” (NASB)

Chapter 5

RESPONDING TO THE CALL OF GOD

(FAITH IN JESUS AND FOLLOWING JESUS)

IN THE FIRST FOUR CHAPTERS...

We've laid the groundwork for a basic understanding of God, ourselves, the relationship between God and mankind, and the world in which we live. God is holy and God is love. Mankind sins and falls short of the glory of God. Grace allows a holy God to extend His love to a fallen creation. Mankind is free to receive or reject the grace of God. The inevitable result of the gift of freewill is a sinful, fallen world, but if we will choose to receive God's grace, we can know true Joy and Peace within it.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine in more detail how we receive God's grace. How do we know and walk with the living God? God's voice calls out to us. What exactly does it say, and how are we to respond? What does God require of us, if we are to experience a relationship with Him that will bring us the Joy and Peace we long for in this fallen world? Chapters 6 and 7 will look at the outward and inward results of receiving God's grace; that is, *why* we should heed the call of God. But first we will focus on the practical mechanics of *how* we recognize and respond to the voice of God that offers His love to each and every one of us.

THE VOICE OF GOD REACHES EVERY HUMAN BEING THROUGHOUT HUMAN HISTORY (COMMON GRACE).

An unmistakable call.

God calls out to every human being throughout human history, declaring His existence and love for us. He does so in many ways. God reveals Himself to us in the beauty of nature and the natural order of life. God's Spirit assures us in our hearts that God is, and that He cares for us. The voice of God is unmistakable, and it resonates in every human heart.*

* These next few pages are an introduction to far-reaching principles that will be developed in more detail throughout this study. How we know God exists, and how we respond to this knowledge, both relate directly to knowing Joy and Peace in a fallen world. We will return to these important questions many times, considering them from different perspectives.

Psalm 19:1-6 “The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their utterances to the end of the world... and there is nothing hidden from its heat.” (NASB)

Psalm 97:6 “The heavens declare His righteousness, and all the peoples have seen His glory.” (NASB)

John 16:8 “And He (*the Holy Spirit*)... will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment;” (NASB)

This voice of God is felt (rather than literally heard) in the hearts all of mankind. It proclaims to us that God is, God cares, and God will provide for us if we will respond to His call. It reaches every human being throughout human history, no matter where we are or what we do. Of course some exception can be made for those with mental disabilities and for young children, but the principle is that every healthy adult knows deep down in his or her heart God exists and God loves them. God’s Spirit places this knowledge there. This is in a sense the first grace extended to mankind, sometimes called *Common Grace*. It is the universal message ingrained in every human heart: God is, and God loves you.

Acts 17:26-28 “From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being’...” (NIV)

Proverbs 20:27 “The lamp of the LORD searches the spirit of a man; it searches out his inmost being.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

SOME HEED THE VOICE OF GOD, AND OTHERS REFUSE THE CALL.

A voice that may be denied.

While the voice of God reaches every human being throughout human history, not every person responds to the call. Some hear the voice of God crying out to them and embrace it with all of their hearts. Others harden their hearts and refuse the call, wishing nothing to do with any god other than their own base desires.

Romans 1:18-32 “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as

God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions... receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.” (NASB)

Where destinies are made.

How we respond to Common Grace, this initial calling of God that proclaims to us God is and God cares, is the first great turning point in every person’s life. It is the first “fork in the road,” where we must choose which path we will take in the journey of life. We are led either by God’s voice down a road of His choosing, or by our own impulses down a road of our own choosing.

Deuteronomy 30:19,20 “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the LORD your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days...” (NASB)

This is where destinies are made. It is through these foundational life choices we either discover and enjoy the destiny God had in mind when He chose to create us, or we create an alternate destiny of our own, leading only to darkness and despair.

If we heed the call of God and follow where His voice leads, God is faithful (and indeed bound by the justice of His holy character) to provide us with the grace we need in order to fulfill His plan for our lives. If we refuse the call, God leaves us to our own devices. This demonstrates the enormity of the gift of freewill. In many ways, it is our highest and most dangerous gift.

Jeremiah 29:13 “You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.” (NASB)

Jeremiah 33:3 “Call to Me and I will answer you, and I will tell you great and mighty things, which you do not know.” (NASB)

John 7:17 “If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching...” (NASB)

Psalm 16:11 “You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.” (NIV)

1 Chronicles 28:9 “... serve Him with a whole heart and a willing mind; for the LORD searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will reject you forever.” (NASB)

ALL HUMAN BEHAVIOR IS MOTIVATED BY ONE OF TWO THINGS: HUMILITY OR PRIDE.

The opening move.

If God’s grace and mankind’s freewill are the two great themes that play throughout human history, then Common Grace, the universal knowledge of all mankind that God exists and God cares, is the opening movement of the symphony. It’s the first move in the game of celestial chess between Creator and creation. God opens by placing the knowledge of His existence and love in our hearts. The next move is ours.

This Common Grace extended to all mankind is motivated by God’s love and His desire to be fair with His creation. We could not be held responsible for the manner in which we exercise our freewill if we did not begin with a certainty in our hearts of God’s existence and love. From this common starting point, we are free to steer our lives down the course of our own choosing, and we are thereafter rightly accountable for the decisions we make. We know God exists and He cares for us. What we do with this common knowledge justly determines our fate, both in this life and in eternity.

Two possible responses.

There are only two responses to God’s opening move: Humility or Pride. We sense the voice of God calling to our hearts, assuring us that He is and He loves us, and we either humbly seek to know Him or proudly seek to deny Him.

James 4:6 “... GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE.” (NASB)

Humility and pride are two themes that recur throughout both the Old Testament and the New Testament, and we will talk about them frequently in this study. If you look in a Bible concordance, you will find many verses containing these two words. That’s because humility and pride are the two fundamental motivations of all human

behavior. They are the two courses available to us when we are confronted with the knowledge of God's existence and love. Once we become aware that a holy God loves us, our choices are motivated by either humility or pride, and it is this motivation standing behind our choices that is of primary importance to our Creator.

Proverbs 16:2 "All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, but the LORD weighs the motives." (NASB)

1 Samuel 16:7 "... for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." (NASB)

1 Corinthians 4:5 "Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God." (NASB)

Proverbs 29:23 "A man's pride will bring him low, but a humble spirit will obtain honor." (NASB)

If our hearts are humble, we hear the call of God and we run to Him. We want to understand Him and His ways; and when we discover His holiness and love, we want to serve Him. His voice is light, and our desire is to be illuminated.

Micah 7:7,8 "But as for me, I will watch expectantly for the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me... Though I fall I will rise; though I dwell in darkness, the LORD is a light for me." (NASB)

Psalms 36:5-9 "Your lovingkindness, O LORD, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness reaches to the skies. Your righteousness is like the mountains of God... How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God! And the children of men take refuge in the shadow of Your wings... For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light." (NASB)

If our hearts are proud, we hear the call of God and we hide from Him. We sense a higher power, the presence of something greater than ourselves, and we evade Him like a hunted animal. Instead of receiving God as a loving Creator to guide us into lives of meaning and purpose, we reject Him as an intruder who might prevent us from indulging ourselves in that which we know is wrong. God's voice is still light, but our desire is for darkness, and the apparent cover it provides for our sin.

John 3:19-21 "... the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God." (NASB)

Humility is recognizing the glory of God (His holiness and love) and embracing it. We delight in the existence of something greater than ourselves, and our desire is to know and walk in harmony with Him. A humble heart wants to *serve* God, not *be* God.

Micah 6:8 “... what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (NIV)

Psalms 73:25,26 “... earth has nothing I desire besides you (*God*)... God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” (NIV)

Psalms 130:1-7 “Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD; Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you. I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope... put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love...” (NIV)

Pride is recognizing the glory of God and defying it. We hate the existence of something greater than ourselves, and our response is to either ignore it, pretend it is something other than what we know it to truly be, or actively oppose it. A prideful heart wants to *be* God, not *serve* Him.

Proverbs 21:2-4,24 “Every man’s way is right in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the hearts... Haughty eyes and a proud heart, the lamp of the wicked, is sin... ‘Proud,’ ‘Haughty,’ ‘Scoffer,’ are his names, who acts with insolent pride.” (NASB)

Isaiah 14:13-15 “You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to the heavens; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly... I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.’ But you are brought down to the realm of the dead, to the depths of the pit.” (NIV)

The essence of life – To honor God or indulge ourselves.

When we boil life down to its essence, we discover we are beings blessed with the knowledge that God is, God loves us, and God will take care of us if we will let Him. Each day we choose either to draw nearer to Him or to run further from Him. On the surface our choices might deal with some dilemma regarding people or things, but at its core our choices are to honor God or indulge ourselves. Even the smallest decisions matter to God, because in the end, if we could see our choices the way God sees them, it is Him we are choosing either for or against.

Matthew 25:40,45 “... whatever you did for one of the least of these brother of mine (*Jesus*), you did for me... whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.” (NIV)

Proverbs 14:21,31 “It is a sin to despise one’s neighbor, but blessed is the one who is kind to the needy... Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.” (NIV)

2 Peter 2:9-19 “... the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise

authority. Daring, self-willed... reviling where they have no knowledge... suffering wrong as the wages of doing wrong... They are stains and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, as they carouse with you, having eyes full of adultery that never cease from sin, enticing unstable souls, having a heart trained in greed, accursed children; forsaking the right way, they have gone astray... For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved.” (NASB)

Galatians 5:13 “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.” (NIV)

1 Peter 5:6,7 “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.” (NASB)

PRIDE LEADS TO APATHY, PHILOSOPHY, AND (FALSE) RELIGION.

The devices of mankind.

We all sense the voice of God calling to us. If in our pride we harden our hearts and reject the call, God does not force His grace upon us. He leaves us to our own devices. God continues to call out to us until the end of our days. He emphatically does not want anyone to fall away. But freewill is a mighty gift we can use to our benefit or destruction. It is truly a two-edged sword, upon which we can secure our happiness or impale ourselves.

2 Peter 3:9 “The Lord is... patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (NIV)

2 Thessalonians 2:10 “... They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.” (NIV)

Ephesians 4:18,19 “They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Pride usually leads us to one of three things: A life of apathy, philosophy, or (for lack of a better term) “religion.” These are the devices of mankind, wherein a prideful heart seeks meaning and solace.

Apathy.

In apathy, men and women despair of ever finding true meaning in life, and usually seek solace in the material things of this world: Money, fame, power, drugs, alcohol, promiscuous sex, etc.

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 “**I (Solomon, perhaps the most powerful and wealthy man to ever live) said to myself, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself.’ And behold, it too was futility... I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; I made gardens and parks for myself, and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees... I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. Also, I collected for myself silver and gold, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself... the pleasures of men – many concubines. Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem... And all that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure... I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.” (NASB)**

Philosophy.

In philosophy, men and women seek meaning in life, but apart from God. We rely on systems of humanistic thought to come to some sort of terms with life.

Psalm 14:1 “**The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God..’ ” (NIV)**

Colossians 2:2-8 “**... be encouraged... attaining to all the wealth that comes from full assurance of understanding... so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument... See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.” (NASB)**

(False) religion.

We will use the term “religion” to represent humanity’s attempt to understand life and find happiness through a deity of some kind, but either through a deity other than God, or through God but not based on His Word. This is a false religion, in which we accept that God exists, but rather than seeking to know Him as He truly is and serve Him accordingly, we twist His true nature into something that serves our own purposes, so in the end we are worshiping a god of our own creation, rather than the God who created us.

Proverbs 16:25 “**There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.” (NASB)**

2 Timothy 4:3,4 “**For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.” (NASB)**

Isaiah 44:19 “No one stops to think, no one has the knowledge or understanding to say... ‘Shall I bow down to a block of wood?’ ” (NIV)

Religion is often very subtle in its deception. It mixes the truth we know with lies designed to appeal to our pride. Religion can be difficult to resist because it says what we want to hear, giving us excuses to do what we want to do but know deep down inside is wrong. Religion appeals to what is right from the human point of view, rather than what is right from God’s point of view. As a result, we follow the religious traditions of men, instead of the Word of the living God, and we never come to know the truth regarding the voice of God that calls to us within our hearts.

Isaiah 29:13 “The Lord says: ‘These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.’ ” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Jeremiah 14:14-16 “... The prophets are prophesying falsehood in My (*God’s*) name. I have neither sent them nor commanded them or spoken to them; they are prophesying to you a false vision, divination, futility and the deception of their own minds... I shall pour out their own wickedness on them.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 11:3-15 “But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully... such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness...” (NASB)

2 Timothy 3:2-7 “For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant... holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; avoid such men as these. For among them are those who enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (NASB)

HUMILITY LEADS TO A DISCOVERY OF OUR CALLING.

Seeking and Finding.

We’ve seen what happens when we harden our hearts to the calling of God. With regret, God leaves us to our own devices. But what is God’s response to a humble heart that hears His voice and seeks to find its source?

Hebrews 4:7 “... just as has been said before, ‘TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS.’ ” (NASB)

1 Chronicles 28:9 “... serve Him with a whole heart and a willing mind; for the LORD searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will reject you forever.” (NASB)

When we seek God, we find Him! That’s a promise we can count on, repeated many times throughout both the Old and New Testament. Why? Because God must reveal Himself to a heart that is truly searching. Anything else would be unfair and compromise His perfect holiness. And God’s perfect love motivates Him to do the same thing, because God loves His creation. After all, God sent His Son and allowed Him to die for us. What greater evidence of God’s love could we ask for, and what clearer indication could we desire that God will respond to our seeking? It doesn’t matter what we’ve done or how bad we might have been. When we humbly turn and seek God, God promises to pour out His grace upon us.

Jeremiah 29:13 “You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.” (NASB)

Jeremiah 3:13-15 “Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the LORD your God... Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding.” (NASB)

Romans 5:8 “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (NIV)

Romans 8:31,32 “What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (NIV)

Luke 11:9-13 “So I (*Jesus*) say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give... to those who ask him!” (NIV)

James 1:5 “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.” (NASB)

When we heed the voice of God, what do we then hear? To what purpose do we find we have been called? Through Common Grace, we sense that God exists and God cares. What then do we discover when we follow the voice that calls out to us? When we seek, what do we find?

THE VOICE OF GOD CALLS US TO TWO THINGS: SALVATION AND HOLINESS.

Birth and Birthright.

As we explore the Word of God, we discover that the voice of God calls us to essentially two things: Salvation and Holiness. God wants us to accept the gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, and then lead holy lives by following the example Jesus set for us while He was here on earth. Salvation is birth into the family of God. Holiness is a way of living that allows us to claim our birthright as a child of God.

1 Timothy 2:3,4 “... God our Savior... desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (NASB)

1 John 3:23 “... this is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ...” (NASB)

John 6:40 “For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son, and believes in Him will have eternal life...” (NASB)

2 Peter 3:11-14 “... what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives... make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.” (NIV)

1 Peter 1:15,16 “But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’” (NIV)

1 Thessalonians 4:7 “For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.” (NIV)

2 Timothy 1:8,9 “So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord... He has saved us and called us to a holy life...” (NIV)

SALVATION COMES THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS (SAVING GRACE).

A child of God is born.

Most have heard the expression “born again.” It’s used in the Bible as a picture of what happens when we accept Jesus as our Savior. Everyone has a physical birth. The moment we place our faith in Jesus, we have a second, spiritual birth into the family of God.

John 3:3-6 “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God... That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.’” (NASB)

1 Peter 1:23 “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.” (NIV)

At the moment of salvation, God’s Word declares that we are a new creation, fully reconciled to God. As we saw in Chapter 3, our sins are forgiven and we are made righteous, so we no longer fall short of the glory of God. There is no longer any condemnation. On the contrary, we are received as a beloved child of the living God.

2 Corinthians 5:17,18 “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ...” (NASB)

Romans 8:1-17 “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus... the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, ‘*Abba*, Father.’ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ...” (NIV)

Salvation has to do with our position from an eternal perspective. We become God’s children, forever. When we enter the family of God through faith in Christ, we receive eternal life, the unbreakable promise that when we die, we will spend eternity with God in heaven. Our relationship with God is established and secure for all time. It can never be taken from us. The child of God need have no fear of death.

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (NIV)

John 6:37-40 “... the one who comes to Me (*Jesus*) I will certainly not cast out... This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given to Me I lose nothing... that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life...” (NASB)

John 10:28,29 “I (*Jesus*) give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.” (NIV)

Romans 8:38,39 “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NIV)

Hebrews 7:25 “Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him...” (NASB)

Romans 11:29 “for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 15:53-58 “For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, ‘DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP in victory. O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?’... thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.” (NASB)

Common Grace, the universal knowledge of the existence and love of God, is extended to every human being. But salvation, what we could refer to as *Saving Grace*, is extended only to those who answer the voice that calls out to them, and accept the grace established through the saving work of Jesus on the cross.

John 1:12 “But as many as received Him (*Jesus Christ as Savior*), to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name,” (NASB)

Salvation is like birth. It happens once and is never repeated. It’s an absolute. You’ve either been born, or you haven’t. And once you’ve been born into a family, you can’t be unborn from them, even if you try to abandon them. You can run away from your family, but no matter how far you go, you will always be connected by blood.

Holiness is something different. Rather than a single event, like birth, it’s a process that takes place over time, more like maturing from a newborn to an adult. Our holiness is relative, not absolute, and we can move towards holiness or away from it. It can be gained or lost. But how?

HOLINESS COMES THROUGH FOLLOWING JESUS.

The child of God claims his or her inheritance.

“Holiness” is a somewhat antiquated term. We don’t use it very often in modern conversation, and when we do, we don’t always know exactly what it means. We’ve seen that “holy” is generally defined as: Spiritually perfect. Holiness, then, is leading a life that is spiritually pure and honorable before God. “Godliness” would be a synonym, and “Integrity,” in a spiritual sense, would be a modern equivalent.

1 Timothy 4:6-8 “... nourished on the words of faith and of the sound doctrine... discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness... godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.” (NASB)

1 Timothy 2:2,3 “... live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior,” (NIV)

Psalms 15:1,2 “O LORD, who may abide in Your tent? Who may dwell on Your holy hill? He who walks with integrity, and works righteousness, and speaks truth in his heart.” (NASB)

1 Chronicles 29:17 “I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity...” (NIV)

Jesus lived approximately thirty-three years before He was crucified. During this time, He never sinned. He was faced with many temptations of every sort, but He never stumbled. Jesus led a pure, holy life before God and His fellow mankind, and in doing so, He became the living paradigm for a life that is pleasing to God.

1 Peter 1:18,19 “... you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold... but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.” (NASB)

1 John 3:3-5 “... He is pure... You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin.” (NASB)

Hebrews 4:15,16 “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (NASB)

God made it easy for us when it comes to knowing how we are to live. We are to follow the example of His Son. If we want to know how God would have us handle any circumstance in life, we need look no further than Jesus. When we examine how Jesus lived His life, we discover how we are to live our lives. To live a holy life, we simply follow the example of Jesus.

1 Peter 2:21 “... Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.” (NIV)

Ephesians 5:2 “and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (NIV)

1 John 4:16,17 “... God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus.” (NIV)

John 13:34,35 “A new commandment I (*Christ*) give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (NASB)

1 John 2:5,6 “But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.” (NIV)

Through His death, Jesus saved us from death. Through His life, Jesus taught us how to live. Jesus’ death opened the door to salvation, an eternity in heaven spent in the presence and grace of God. Jesus’ life opened the door to holiness, a lifetime on earth spent in the presence and grace of God. What Jesus did on the cross ensures (when we put our faith in Him) our lives in eternity will be blessed. What Jesus did before the cross ensures (when we follow Him) our lives here on earth will be blessed.

Salvation comes through *faith* in Jesus, by which we are born into the family of God. Holiness comes through *following* Jesus, by which we grow into a spiritually mature adult, entitled to receive the birthright of a child of God. Through Salvation, we enter the family. Through holiness, we claim our inheritance.

1 Peter 1:3,4 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope... to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you,” (NASB)

A “birthright” is a right or privilege that is granted to someone by virtue of birth into a specific family. It’s similar to an inheritance that becomes ours the moment we are born. But often inheritances are conditional and receiving them depends upon accomplishing some predetermined goal (e.g., reaching a certain age or earning a college degree). Being born into the family makes us eligible for the inheritance, but to collect the inheritance we must fulfill the requirements established by the one from whom we receive our rights.

When we put our faith in Jesus, we are born into the family of God, and immediately we become heirs to an inheritance from God that is so extraordinary, the Bible tells us it cannot be described in human terms. Our birthright includes Joy and Peace in this life, and it also includes much, much more. But in order to receive that to which we have a right as a child of God, we must first fulfill the requirement of the One from whom we inherit: We must live our lives with the holiness demonstrated by His Son.

1 Corinthians 2:9 “but just as it is written, ‘THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.’ ” (NASB)

This study is centered on the part of our birthright that relates to finding Joy and Peace in this life. In a sense, we become eligible for Joy and Peace – a true, abiding happiness – the moment we accept Jesus as our Savior. But whether we come to know Joy and Peace as we journey through life is totally dependent upon whether we follow Jesus by living holy lives.

There are also eternal aspects to our birthright that are tremendously exciting, and when we begin to understand them, they become a source of great comfort and tremendous hope in this life, as we look forward to the extraordinary things God has in store for us in the next life.

What are God’s plans for His children in eternity? At the end of human history, God does basically two things:

- He makes everything new, and
- He makes everything right.

One day, God will destroy the universe and everything in it. Every single thing that exists throughout the vastness of space will be utterly destroyed.

2 Peter 3:7-14 “... the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction... the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.

Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness... the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless,” (NASB)

At first, this is a somewhat frightening thought. The good news is that after destroying the universe and everything in it, God will then make everything anew. This includes both the universe in which we exist, and the very bodies within which our spirits dwell. The difference in eternity will be that in the new universe and in our new bodies, the stain of sin (and everything that goes along with it) will be gone forever, and we will exist in bodies and a universe of total and complete perfection.

Revelation 21:1-4 “Then I saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth,’ for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’ He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’ ” (NIV)

Philippians 3:8-21 “... I (*Paul*) consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord... But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 15:50-58 “... flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable... the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’... thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” (NIV)

Not only will all things be made new, but in eternity all things will be made right. God almighty will personally dry every tear, right every wrong, and reward the faithfulness of His children with indescribable blessings. And these blessings will be designed by our Creator not only to richly reward faithful service, but also to comfort and heal every heartache and suffering, hundreds of times over.

Matthew 19:28-30 “Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne... everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.’ ” (NIV)

Revelation 7:17 “For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 5:1-10 “For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven... we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.” (NASB)

Colossians 3:23,24 “Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.” (NASB)

Matthew 5:5-45 “Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth... Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me (*Jesus*). Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great... love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven...” (NASB)

Hebrews 6:10-12 “God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them... We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.” (NIV)

Hebrews 11:6 “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (NIV)

Isaiah 49:23 “... those who hope in me (*God*) will not be disappointed.” (NIV)

The eternal blessings God wants us to inherit are a subject unto themselves, and rather than get sidetracked with a detailed look at them here in the body of this work, we will save them for the Coda at the very end of our study, when we will have the best chance to at least partially grasp what almighty God has carefully prepared for His faithful children as an everlasting inheritance from their loving Father.

For now understand this: In eternity there are things awaiting those who follow Jesus that are so wonderful and so extraordinary, we are incapable in this life of even imagining them, let alone understanding them. Eternity in heaven is a place of “no more tears;” that is, perfect happiness. It is also a place of unimaginable excitement, pleasure, and fulfillment, where God rewards those who are faithful to Him in this life with tremendous blessings God’s Word can only describe as beyond our present

comprehension. It is emphatically something to look forward to, and something to draw encouragement from when we face times of darkness and testing in this life.

1 Timothy 6:7-19 “For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it... pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith... Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.” (NIV)

Psalms 62:1-12 “My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken... Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken. My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge... One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong, and that you, O Lord, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

2 Timothy 4:7,8 “I (*Paul*) have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 4:17,18 “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (NASB)

Romans 8:18 “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (NASB)

Revelation 2:26-28 “And he who overcomes... I (*Jesus*) will give him the morning star.” (NASB)

Ephesians 3:20-21 “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.” (NIV)

To experience the fullness of heaven in eternity, we simply do the same thing we must do in order to experience Joy and Peace in this life. And so for now we will focus on the quality that will allow us to one day claim our birthright of knowing Joy and Peace in a fallen world and of receiving our full, eternal inheritance in the world to come: Holiness.

As we have seen, Salvation comes from *one* decision to place our *faith* in Jesus. Holiness comes from a *lifetime* of decisions to *follow* Jesus. But what does it mean to

follow Jesus? How did Jesus live His life, and what specifically about His life are we to emulate if we desire to lead the lives to which the voice of God calls us?

WE FOLLOW JESUS BY EMULATING HIS LOVE FOR GOD AND MANKIND.

The Christian way of life in a word.

In a word, the life of Jesus was characterized by: Love. Everything Jesus thought, said, and did expressed a love that is pure and undefiled in the eyes of God. Jesus' love is how holiness is expressed in a fallen world, and so we are called to follow Jesus by emulating His love. When the love of Christ becomes manifest in our lives, we take on the holiness of Christ, and become the men and women God created us to be.

1 Timothy 1:5 “But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” (NASB)

Ephesians 5:2 “and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (NIV)

Two loves – Love for God and love for mankind.

Jesus' love can be broken down into two very different kinds of love – love for God and love for mankind. The two are different because the objects of love are different. God is holy and God is love. Mankind sins and falls short of the glory of God. Because the objects of love are so very different, the two loves have very different purposes and expressions in God's design.

Matthew 22:35-40 “One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ‘Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’ Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.’” (NIV)

To love God is: To trust Him. Once we understand who God is and what He has done for us, our gratitude, respect, and admiration for Him should motivate us to love Him. We see in God one who is worthy of our love, and we express our love by trusting Him and obeying His commandments. This is true when our lives seem blessed, and even when our hearts are breaking.

Deuteronomy 30:16 “For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you...” (NIV)

Deuteronomy 10:12,13 “... what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?” (NIV)

Proverbs 3:5,6 “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” (NIV)

Isaiah 26:3,4 “The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect peace, because he trusts in You. Trust in the LORD forever, for in GOD the LORD, we have an everlasting Rock.” (NASB)

Psalms 37:3-40 “Trust in the LORD and do good... Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He will do it. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light... Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him... the humble will... delight themselves in abundant prosperity... the LORD sustains the righteous. The LORD knows the days of the blameless, and their inheritance will be forever... Wait for the LORD and keep His way, and He will exalt you... the salvation of the righteous is from the LORD; He is their strength in time of trouble. The LORD helps them and delivers them; He delivers them from the wicked and saves them, because they take refuge in Him.” (NASB)

Trusting God can be one of the most difficult things to do, because in order to trust Him, we have to stand back, rest from our own labors, and let God go to work on our behalf. We have to wait patiently for God to do something we cannot or should not do for ourselves, which often goes against our nature. But it is this very action of taking our cares and placing them at God’s feet that allows God to go to work for us, and brings us the Joy and Peace we long for in a fallen world.

Lamentations 3:21-26 “This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. The LORD’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. ‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘Therefore I have hope in Him.’ The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him. It is good that he waits silently for the salvation of the LORD.” (NASB)

Hebrews 4:10 “for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from their works...” (NIV)

2 Chronicles 20:15-17 “... Do not be afraid or discouraged... For the battle is not yours, but God’s... You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the LORD will give you... Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them... and the LORD will be with you.” (NIV)

Exodus 14:13,14 “... Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today... The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.” (NIV)

2 Chronicles 16:9 “For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His...” (NASB)

Philippians 4:6,7 “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (NASB)

To love mankind is: To be compassionate towards one another. It is treating people with kindness and forgiveness, regardless of how they treat us. When someone is in trouble, we help. When a friend needs comfort, we listen and offer encouragement. And when someone is unkind to us, we are not unkind in return. Instead, we treat them with patience and generosity, even though they do not deserve it. This is how God treats us, and this is how God commands we treat one another.

Colossians 3:12-15 “... put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts...” (NASB)

Romans 12:10-21 “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor... rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep... Never pay back evil for evil to anyone... If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,’ says the Lord. ‘BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (NASB)

Luke 6:31-38 “Treat others the same way you want them to treat you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same... But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned. Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure – pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return.” (NASB)

We should quickly note that the call to love our fellow man is not a call for pacifism. The Bible is clear that a nation’s just laws should be enforced and countries should defend themselves, as we live out our lives in a fallen world.

Romans 13:1-4 “Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities... for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.” (NASB)

Proverbs 17:15 “Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent – the LORD detests them both.” (NIV)

Proverbs 24:25 “But it will go well with those who convict the guilty, and rich blessing will come on them.” (NIV)

Proverbs 21:15 “When justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers.” (NIV)

Nehemiah 4:14 “... Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.” (NIV)

As you can see, the ways we are to love God and love our fellow mankind are very different. We love God because He is *worthy* of love. Love for God involves affection, admiration, and adoration. We place our confidence and trust in God and live our lives for Him, even in times of greatest adversity, because He is worthy of our love.

Love for mankind requires that we love our neighbor *regardless* of whether our neighbor is worthy of love. It does not involve affection, admiration, adoration, or trust, but instead patience, kindness, and forgiveness. It would be crazy for God to require us to trust all mankind, because not all mankind is worthy of our trust. We are simply required to treat others the way we would have them treat us. And our God does not require patience, kindness, or forgiveness from us, because He is holy, but He delights in our trust and obedience.

Jeremiah 17:5-8 “This is what the LORD says: ‘Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the LORD. That person will be like a bush in the wastelands; they will not see prosperity when it comes. They will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives. But blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.’ ” (NIV)

Psalms 41:9-12 “Even my close friend, someone I trusted, one who shared my bread, has turned against me. But may you have mercy on me, LORD; raise me up... Because of my integrity you uphold me and set me in your presence forever.” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 2:5 “... your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

Ephesians 4:32 “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” (NASB)

The solution to all problems.

When we look at the various problems we encounter in life, we can break them down into two general groups: Problems with *circumstances* and problems with *relationships*. Jesus' love for God is the example of how we are to deal with problems with circumstances, and Jesus' love for mankind is the example of how we are to deal with problems with relationships. Jesus' love is therefore the solution to every type of problem we face.

Problems with circumstances.

When we encounter problems with our circumstances in life, such as health or finances, we are called to follow Jesus' example in trusting God to care for us and bring about His purpose. God wants us to have faith that He will supply all of our needs according to the plan He has for our lives.

Philippians 4:19 "... God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus." (NASB)

Matthew 6:25-34 "... do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith! Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?'... for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." (NASB)

Isaiah 58:11 "And the LORD will continually guide you, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, and give strength to your bones; and you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail." (NASB)

2 Corinthians 9:8 "And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work." (NIV)

Hebrews 4:16 "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." (NIV)

We have to believe that God will do what He has promised to do. Rather than becoming worried or fearful about difficult circumstances, God wants us to trust Him to keep His Word. Then through our faith in Him we can find peace, rest, and the happiness God intends to be ours.

Hebrews 11:6 “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (NIV)

Psalm 46:1-3 “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains quake at its swelling pride.” (NASB)

Psalm 23:4 “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me...” (NASB)

Psalm 16:11 “You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.” (NIV)

Matthew 11:28-30 “Come to me (*Jesus*), all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (NIV)

God loves us. He gave His Son for us. If He would let His Son die on our behalf, He will also guide and protect us when we face difficult circumstances, if we will trust and obey. Think of someone you love more than anyone else in the world. Would you let him or her be brutally beaten, then crucified on a cross, so ultimately someone else could live? God did that for us, even though we sin against Him every day. We can trust in a love that powerful and count on the source of that love to care for us no matter how rough things in this world might become.

Romans 5:8 “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (NIV)

Romans 8:31-39 “What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NIV)

Hebrews 13:5,6 “... He Himself has said, ‘I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER FORSAKE YOU,’ so that we confidently say, ‘THE LORD IS MY HELPER, I WILL NOT BE AFRAID. WHAT WILL MAN DO TO ME?’ ” (NASB)

God wants us to trust Him when we face difficult circumstances in life. Well, that is easy to say, but it can be very difficult to do. How can we prepare so we are ready when hard times come? And when adversity inevitably strikes, what can we do to stand firm?

In preparing for hardship, one of the best things we can do is: *Memorize scripture*. We should memorize the promises of God found in the Bible that assure us God is always present, even when the world seems lonely and dark. We will need them when adversity strikes. Our first human impulse can be to freeze up or panic, and we need the promises of God to hold on to so we can remain calm and think.

2 Peter 1:19 “So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts.” (NASB)

Then when the day of adversity comes, we can draw upon the scripture we have memorized and: *Focus on biblical principles, not the problem*. We have to stop, get our eyes off of our problems, and concentrate on the principles behind the promises we have memorized, the principles that explain why the promises are true. We must call upon all we know about God – His character, His behavior, His grace, and His love. It’s also helpful to recall the things He has done for us in the past, and what He has done for other people we know or have read about in the Bible. We must, as the Psalmist writes, “be still, and know that He is God,” and recognize His infinite love and power. As we do, our fear will begin to melt away, and it will be replaced with a confidence in God that gives us the courage we need to face adversity with faith.

Psalm 46:1-10 “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake... The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress... He says, ‘Be still, and know that I am God...’ ” (NIV)

Finally, we must: *Reach doctrinal conclusions*. We must, with the help of God’s Spirit, properly apply all the truths we know about God to our specific problem. Is it really so great it cannot be handled by the One who created the universe and everything in it? We know His love is infinite. We know His power is infinite. His eyes are always upon us, and His hands are outstretched, ready to receive our problems the minute we turn them over to Him. The moment we place our trust in the Lord is the moment He gets to work on our behalf.

2 Timothy 2:15 “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.” (NASB)

Psalm 55:22 “Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous be shaken.” (NIV)

Psalm 130:5-7 “I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope... put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love...” (NIV)

1 Peter 5:6,7 “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.” (NASB)

Proverbs 2:3-11 “indeed, if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will... find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding... Then you will understand what is right and just and fair – every good path. For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you.” (NIV)

When we encounter problems with our circumstances, God simply calls upon us to trust Him. This is how we express our love for Him during adversity. Many times trusting God will run counter to all of our instincts. We will want to try to take control of the problem ourselves. But we are called to do just the opposite – to turn control of the problem over to God.

Psalms 4:1-5 “Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness... Be gracious to me and hear my prayer... The LORD hears when I call to Him... and be still... and trust in the LORD.” (NASB)

Isaiah 30:15 “This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says: ‘In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength...’” (NIV)

In trusting God, the first thing we have to do is: Stop. We must stop wrestling with the problem in our own strength, so we can start focusing on God and relying on His strength. Before we will ever be able to rest in the plan of God and our relationship with Him, we have to rest from our own activity. We can’t go out and try to take charge of things we have no control over. If we do, most likely we will just mess things up and make matters worse. And so the first thing we have to do is relax and give the problem to God. Then our thoughts are focused Him, His plan, and our relationship with Him, rather than our troubles.

Hebrews 4:10 “for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from their works...” (NIV)

Exodus 14:13,14 “... Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today... The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.” (NIV)

Psalms 33:10-22 “The LORD foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations. Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD... No king is saved by the size of his army; no warrior escapes by his great strength. A horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength it cannot save. But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love... We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. May your unfailing love be with us, LORD, even as we put our hope in you.” (NIV)

Trusting God is not being indecisive. It is actively choosing to put our confidence in Him. Nor is it feeling sorry for ourselves, moping around, or sitting in a corner and pouting. Trusting God is a position of inner strength derived from confidence in God, which in turn gives us the courage to face our problems.

Psalm 40:4-17 “How blessed is the man who has made the LORD his trust, and has not turned to the proud, nor to those who lapse into falsehood... You, O LORD, will not withhold Your compassion from me; Your lovingkindness and Your truth will continually preserve me. For evils beyond number have surrounded me... Let all who seek You rejoice and be glad in You... Let the Lord be mindful of me. You are my help and my deliverer...” (NASB)

Psalm 27:1,14 “The LORD is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid?... Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.” (NIV)

Nearly every biblical idea can be distorted by a prideful heart, so we should stop a moment and apply some common sense to these principles. When the Bible says “wait for the Lord,” that means after we have done all we should to deal sensibly with a problem based upon all we have learned from God’s Word. For example, if our problem is unemployment, we shouldn’t sit around on the couch watching sports and eating junk food, expecting a job to appear out of nowhere because we are “trusting in the Lord.” We must actively and honorably seek employment, and then trust the Lord to provide. “Doing all we should to deal sensibly with a problem” must also not be abused as an excuse to compromise our integrity to get what we want. We don’t stretch the truth on an application to get a job. We tell the truth, and trust the Lord.

Why is trusting God required to solve problems with our circumstances? Because trust develops holiness in our character. It takes humility to put our faith in God and let Him provide, but in so doing, we allow the Lord to work in our lives and bring about greater blessings than we could ever provide for ourselves; and we demonstrate our love for Him and respect for His Word. The result is: We are blessed and God is glorified through His provision for us. God does the work (and therefore receives the glory) and we are blessed. Nothing brings God more glory, honor, and praise than when a person who is suffering places his or her faith in God and His Word. We will never glorify the Lord more than when we put our trust in Him during adversity, and we will never give Him greater reason to bless us.

2 Thessalonians 3:3 “But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you...” (NIV)

Hebrews 13:9 “... for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace...” (NASB)

Job 2:10 “... Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?...” (NASB)

Romans 8:17,18 “... we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (NASB)

Isaiah 26:4 “Trust in the LORD forever, for in GOD the LORD, we have an everlasting Rock.” (NASB)

Hebrews 13:20,21 “Now may the God of peace... equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.” (NIV)

Proverbs 22:4 “The reward of humility and the fear of the LORD are riches, honor and life.” (NASB)

Problems with relationships.

The other major category of problems we face is problems in our relationships. The solution to relationship problems is to follow the example of Jesus’ love for mankind. This means when a person is behaving badly, we do not react by behaving badly in return. Instead, we treat the person with patience and kindness. Rather than becoming angry or vengeful, we put the problem in God’s hands and forgive.

Romans 12:10 “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor;” (NASB)

Ephesians 4:1,2,32 “... live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love... Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (NIV)

The way we are to love other people is more than just walking away from someone who is unkind to us. It is stepping forward and offering a hand of friendship. It is not returning evil for evil. It is not returning nothing for evil. It is returning *good* for evil. It is “giving a blessing instead.” The love of Christ we are called to emulate is not cold or indifferent. It is vital and alive! It is warm-hearted and generous, in a sincere (not phony) way.

1 Peter 3:8-12 “To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing. For, ‘THE ONE WHO DESIRES LIFE, TO LOVE AND SEE GOOD DAYS, MUST KEEP HIS TONGUE FROM EVIL AND HIS LIPS FROM SPEAKING DECEIT. HE MUST TURN AWAY FROM EVIL AND DO GOOD; HE MUST SEEK PEACE AND PURSUE IT. FOR THE EYES OF THE LORD ARE TOWARD THE RIGHTEOUS, AND HIS EARS ATTEND TO THEIR PRAYER, BUT THE FACE OF THE LORD IS AGAINST THOSE WHO DO EVIL.’ ” (NASB)

Luke 6:27-31 “... Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you... Do to others as you would have them do to you.” (NIV)

Romans 12:14-18 “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse... Never pay back evil for evil to anyone... If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.” (NASB)

Romans 12:9-13 “Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.” (NIV)

1 Peter 2:18-23 “Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable. For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously;” (NASB)

We live in a fallen world amidst fallen people, and as a result problems with relationships will be inevitable and frequent. God does not want these unavoidable problems to drag us down and pull us away from Him. And so we are called to treat those who are antagonistic to us with kindness and integrity. This lifts us out of and above the fray, so God can deal with the person behaving badly as He deems appropriate. Then we can concentrate on the good things in life, set a worthy example for other people to follow, and be ready for the tremendous blessing God infinitely desires to pour out upon those of us who will live our lives the way His Son lived His life.

Proverbs 25:21,22 “If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you.” (NIV)

Psalms 73:1-28 “Surely God is good to... those who are pure in heart! But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling... For I was envious of the arrogant as I saw the prosperity of the wicked... They mock and wickedly speak of oppression... When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight until I came into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end. Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction... When my heart was embittered and I was pierced within, then I was senseless and ignorant. I was like a beast before You. Nevertheless I am continually with You; You have taken hold of my right hand. With Your counsel You will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. For, behold, those who are far from You will perish; You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to

You. But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all Your works.” (NASB)

1 Peter 1:22-25 “Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For, ‘All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.’ ” (NIV)

Following the example Jesus set for loving others keeps us free from all the sins we would commit if we gave ourselves over to hate. It prevents a recurring cycle of violence from developing, where revenge seeks revenge upon revenge. It demonstrates our love for God, because sometimes the only thing strong enough to keep us from lashing out at someone who has wronged us is our reverence for our Heavenly Father. It allows God to punish the person who is behaving badly in the proper amount at the proper time. And it allows us to share the love of Jesus, not through words, but through the way we live our lives. When people see us treating a total jerk with kindness and integrity, the love of Christ will be dramatically presented to them, and we will have a tremendous opportunity to share the message of Jesus, as well as a rare satisfaction that comes only from obeying the Word of God.

Proverbs 17:9,14 “Whoever would foster love covers over an offense, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends... Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out.” (NIV)

Proverbs 19:11 “A man’s discretion makes him slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook a transgression.” (NASB)

Hebrews 12:14,15 “Pursue peace with all men... See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled;” (NASB)

Proverbs 26:4 “Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you yourself will be just like him.” (NIV)

1 Peter 3:15,16 “but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame.” (NASB)

If you are ever tempted to take your own revenge, consider this: If you saw a bully picking on your child at the neighborhood playground, you would not hesitate to run in and protect your son or daughter, because you love your kid. But if your child pulls out an Uzi and gets ready to blow the bully away, then your focus shifts from stopping the bully to finding out what in the world your kid is doing with an assault rifle. In the same way, when we try to take our own revenge, God shifts His attention from dealing with our enemies to teaching us how to conduct ourselves in a fallen world.

Proverbs 20:22 “Do not say, ‘I’ll pay you back for this wrong!’ Wait for the LORD, and he will avenge you.” (NIV)

2 Thessalonians 1:6,7 “God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled...” (NIV)

Proverbs 29:23-26 “A man’s pride will bring him low, but a humble spirit will obtain honor... The fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the LORD will be exalted. Many seek the ruler’s favor, but justice for man comes from the LORD.” (NASB)

Deuteronomy 32:35,36 “Vengeance is Mine, and retribution, in due time their foot will slip; for the day of their calamity is near, and the impending things are hastening upon them. For the LORD will vindicate His people, and will have compassion on His servants...” (NASB)

1 Thessalonians 4:6 “... the Lord is the avenger in all these things...” (NASB)

In an ironic way, the most devastating thing you can do to your enemies is to love them. In a sense, it removes them from your periphery and places them squarely in the hands of God. This leaves the door open for God to discipline them in just the right way, at just the right time. And it leaves the door open for God to bless you in ways you could never even imagine.

Romans 12:19-21 “Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,’ says the Lord. ‘BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (NASB)

Proverbs 3:3,4 “Do not let kindness and truth leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. So you will find favor and good repute in the sight of God and man.” (NASB)

Colossians 3:12-25 “... put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts... Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you... For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality.” (NASB)

Hebrews 10:26-31 “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment... For we know him who said, ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ and again, ‘The Lord will judge his people.’ It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (NIV)

Galatians 6:9 “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 2:9 “but just as it is written, ‘THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.’ ” (NASB)

Two sides of the same coin.

There is an inseparable relationship between our love for God and our love for others. Love for God *motivates* the love we have for our fellow mankind. Love for mankind *demonstrates* the love we have for God. The two are so closely tied to each other they cannot truly be separated. It is impossible for a follower of Jesus to love God and hate people, or vice versa. One love is no good without the other. They are two sides of the same coin — the love of Jesus.

1 John 4:11-21 “Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another... We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.” (NIV)

1 Peter 2:19 “For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly.” (NASB)

John 14:15-23 “If you love Me (*Jesus*), you will keep My commandments... He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me... If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word...” (NASB)

John 15:12 “This is My (*Jesus*)’ commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.” (NASB)

The immensity of Jesus’ love.

It’s remarkable to note that if we can remember to love God and love others, then as a natural result we will obey all the other commandments in the Bible. If we love God, we will study His Word, pray, and support our church financially. We will not take the Lord’s name in vain or lie. If we love our fellow mankind, we will share the Gospel, help the needy, and encourage fellow Christians. We will not murder, steal, or commit adultery. The love of Jesus therefore describes in full how God wants us to live our lives after salvation, so we can be happy and blessed by Him.

Matthew 22:35-40 “One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ‘Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’ Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.’” (NIV)

Romans 13:8-10 “Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For this, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET,’ and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.” (NASB)

Galatians 5:14 “For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’” (NASB)

Matthew 7:12 “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” (NIV)

1 John 4:21 “And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.” (NASB)

John 13:17 “If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.” (NASB)

Perhaps the most dramatic examples of Jesus’ love for God and His fellow mankind are His first and last words on the cross. As Jesus was being crucified, He began the ordeal with words of love and forgiveness for the very people who had just tortured Him, taunted Him, and nailed Him to the cross. He ended the ordeal with words of love and trust in His Heavenly Father. We are called to follow this extraordinary example.

Luke 23:34 “Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing (*Jesus’ first words on the cross*)...’” (NIV)

Luke 23:46 “Jesus called out with a loud voice, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit (*Jesus’ last words on the cross*)...’” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 5:15 “And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.” (NIV)

Luke 9:23 “Then he (*Jesus*) said to them all: ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.’” (NIV)

Love for God and others describes how Jesus lived His life. God wants us to live our lives with this same love. This is what it means to be a Christian: We have accepted Christ as Savior, and we live our lives the way He lived His life, with love for God the Father and love for our fellow mankind.

Ephesians 5:2 “and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved...” (NIV)

John 13:34,35 “A new command I (*Jesus*) give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 3:3 “... you are a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.” (NIV)

1 John 2:5,6 “But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.” (NIV)

The love of Christ is an extraordinarily high calling. Who is up to such a task? How do we find the wisdom and strength to love the way the Son of God loved? Where do we find the knowledge and power to follow Jesus?

WE FOLLOW JESUS IN THE LIGHT OF GOD’S WORD AND THROUGH THE POWER OF GOD’S SPIRIT (LIVING GRACE).

Everything we need to follow Jesus.

Our calling is indeed extraordinarily high, but God does not call us to this place without also providing the grace we need to get there. God has granted us everything we need in order to follow Jesus, by giving us His Word and His Spirit.

God’s Word is our light. It is the source of illumination in the darkness of a fallen world. The voice of God that calls to us in our hearts leads us to the scriptures, and through them we gain an understanding of the character of God, the nature of His ways, and how He wants us to live our lives.

Psalm 119:105 “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.” (NIV)

2 Timothy 3:16,17 “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” (NASB)

2 Peter 1:2-4 “Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.” (NASB)

2 Timothy 2:15 “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.” (NASB)

Romans 15:4 “For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” (NASB)

1 Timothy 4:6 “... be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine...” (NASB)

2 Peter 1:19 “So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts.” (NASB)

God’s Spirit is our power. He is the source of understanding, wisdom, and strength in the darkness of a fallen world. He takes God’s Word, makes it real to us, and enables us to live by it.

As we have seen earlier in this study, God’s Spirit does essentially three things:

(1) God’s Spirit helps us to *understand* God’s Word when we hear it;

1 Corinthians 2:10-12 "... The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God... we have received... the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us." (NIV)

John 16:13 "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth..." (NIV)

John 14:26 "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit... will teach you all things..." (NASB)

(2) God's Spirit provides us with the *wisdom* to properly apply God's Word to our changing circumstances; and

John 14:26 "... He (*the Holy Spirit*) will... bring to your remembrance all that I (*Jesus*) said to you." (NASB)

Isaiah 11:2 "The Spirit of the LORD... the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might..." (NIV)

(3) God's Spirit gives us the *strength* to do what God's Word commands, if we want Him to.

Romans 8:26 "... the Spirit helps us in our weakness..." (NIV)

Acts 1:8 "... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes..." (NIV)

Galatians 5:16,17 "... walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another..." (NASB)

Ephesians 3:16 "... be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man;" (NASB)

The importance of prayerful confession.

It's important to note that when we sin, the scriptures tell us the power of God's Spirit in our lives is "quenched" or "grieved." Our sin is like a wet blanket thrown on the fire the Spirit of God kindles in our hearts. This is because sin is the rejection of God's grace, including the power of the Holy Spirit.

1 Thessalonians 5:19 "Do not quench the Spirit." (NIV)

Ephesians 4:30 "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God..." (NIV)

Psalms 66:18 "If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear;" (NASB)

Isaiah 59:1,2 "Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear." (NIV)

But by privately confessing our sins to God in prayer, the power of God's Spirit is restored. This is because when we confess our sin, we demonstrate our acceptance of God's grace. And so God forgives our sin based upon Jesus' work on the cross, and we may once again utilize the provisions of His grace, including the power of the His Spirit.

1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (NASB)

Psalm 32:5 “I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD’; and You forgave the guilt of my sin.” (NASB)

Isaiah 1:13-20 “ ‘I (*the Lord*) cannot endure iniquity... So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you; yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen... Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight... Come now, and let us reason together,’ says the LORD, ‘though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool. If you consent and obey... Truly, the mouth of the LORD has spoken.’ ” (NASB)

Jeremiah 3:12-15 “... I will not look upon you in anger. For I am gracious... Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the LORD your God... Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding.” (NASB)

Ephesians 5:18 “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit,” (NASB)

Notice God’s tremendous grace in 1 John 1:9. Not only does God forgive us for the sins we remember to confess, but when we prayerfully ask for forgiveness, He also cleanses us from “all unrighteousness;” that is, any sins we are unaware of or have forgotten. God’s grace makes allowance for every conceivable shortcoming of mankind.

The Greek word for “confess” in 1 John 1:9 is *homologeō*. It means only to cite, list, or name our sins to God, as if in a legal proceeding. It does not mean to feel sorry for our sins. It has no emotional connotations, and while it’s natural to feel bad about our failures and to want to make restitution for our wrongs, these things do not make any difference as to whether our sins are forgiven by God. Judas did both to no avail (Matthew 27:3-5). What does make a difference is Jesus’ work on the cross. He took away all sin for all time, so upon confession our sins are forgiven regardless of how we “feel,” so long as we are sincere in wishing for forgiveness. This is the greatness of both God’s grace and Jesus’ work on the cross.

Psalm 103:12 “as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.” (NIV)

Don’t misunderstand. This does not mean we should be cavalier about our sins or feel no regret for what we’ve done. It’s merely a recognition that it is not our emotions but Jesus’ work on the cross that secures our forgiveness. This allows us to put aside any uncertainty after we have sinned, accept that God has forgiven us based upon the work of His Son on the cross, and move on to a new and better life.

If how we felt was what mattered, we would spend all our time worrying about whether our “feelings” met the criteria for forgiveness of sin. We would lose the confidence we gain by knowing our sins are forgiven when we name them to God in prayer. The confession in 1 John 1:9 is an objective standard of conduct we can be positive we have met, rather than a subjective evaluation of our feelings that would always leave us guessing.

Also, realize that the mere confession of our sins is not enough to make us happy or to keep us from sinning again. After confession it is necessary to change our attitudes and return to living lives characterized by the love of Christ. It is here how we “feel” becomes an issue, in our attitude towards God and His Word.

Hebrews 12:1-13 “... let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith... FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES... God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?... All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.” (NASB)

Philippians 3:13,14 “... forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (NASB)

Hebrews 10:22 “let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience...” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 7:10,11 “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done...” (NIV)

James 4:6 “... GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE.” (NASB)

Sin and how to deal with it will be studied later in more detail. For now it is enough to simply note that it is very important to confess our sins privately to God in prayer in order to fully utilize the power of God’s Spirit in our lives. Common sense tells us God’s Spirit is not going to be able to do great things in and through us if we arrogantly hold on to unrepentant sin. And so we should all learn to “keep short accounts;” that is, confess our sins privately to God in prayer immediately after we sin, so God’s Spirit can act in our lives to help us learn and live by God’s Word. If we will confess our sins when we pray and ask God for His guidance and power in our lives, God’s Spirit will help us understand God’s Word when we study it, and give us the wisdom and strength to do what it commands.

James 1:5 “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.” (NASB)

Philippians 4:13 “I can do all this through him who gives me strength.” (NIV)

While the power of God’s Spirit can be lost or quenched, the indwelling of God’s Spirit is permanent and cannot be lost. We may lose the Spirit’s power in our lives when we sin, but we are not forsaken. The Holy Spirit remains with us as a demonstration of God’s abiding love and faithfulness, ready to restore our strength the moment we return to the Lord. This is part of the magnificent grace of God and demonstrates the security we enjoy as believers in Christ.

John 14:16,17 “I (*Jesus*) will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth... He abides with you and will be in you.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 1:21,22 “Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.” (NIV)

Ephesians 1:13,14 “And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance...” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 6:19 “... your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God... For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.” (NASB)

Common, Saving, and Living Grace.

Just as God provides Common Grace (to call us from a fallen world), and Saving Grace (to save us from the death that follows our lives within it), through His Spirit and His Word God provides us with *Living Grace*, the grace we need in order to fulfill our calling to follow Jesus during our brief time on earth.

Common Grace *calls us from* a fallen world, introducing us to a path that leads to God. Saving Grace *saves us from* a fallen world, blessing us with an eternity in the presence of God. Living Grace *nourishes us within* a fallen world, enabling us to know our Heavenly Father and walk in harmony with Him, as we live out our lives in a world where everyone sins and everyone falls short.

Romans 8:4 “... do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” (NIV)

Galatians 5:16 “... walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” (NIV)

Ephesians 4:1-24 “... live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace... You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old

self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” (NIV)

We are called to follow Jesus, by emulating His love for God and mankind, in the light of God’s Word and through the power of God’s Spirit. How do we know if we are fulfilling our calling? How can we tell if we are truly following Jesus, by living holy lives?

FOLLOWING JESUS CREATES WITHIN US THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT.

Grapes from thorn bushes?

We recognize a tree by its fruit. We can call a tree anything we like, but ultimately it is the fruit that reveals its identity. In the same way, we identify a follower of Jesus by the fruit of his or her life. Anyone can call himself or herself a Christian (and as we all know, many call themselves Christians who know nothing of Jesus!), but true followers of Christ are made known by the virtues revealed in their thoughts, words, and deeds.

Matthew 7:15-20 “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit... Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.” (NIV)

Luke 6:43-45 “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.” (NIV)

When we follow Jesus (in the light of God’s Word and through the power of God’s Spirit), the Holy Spirit creates within us certain virtues that become the tangible evidence we are truly followers of Christ, referred to in Galatians 5:22 as the “fruit of the Spirit.”

Galatians 5:22,23 “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control...” (NASB)

These nine virtues demonstrate true holiness, and they illustrate how the followers of Jesus should appear to those lost in the world’s darkness. We will look at each of them in turn, and as we do, we will see the lifestyle God has designed for His

children, which brings glory and honor to Him, happiness and blessing to us, and light to a fallen world.

Love.

The first fruit mentioned is love. This is the love for God and our fellow mankind revealed in Christ that we are called to emulate. We begin here because Christian love is the Christian way of life in its most basic form. Christian love is the fundamental expression of the holy life to which we are called. “Holy” is the noun (what we should *be*), and “Love” is the verb (what we should *do*). The holy life God intends for us can be summarized in one word: Love (God and others). Therefore, the first fruit the Holy Spirit creates in our lives as we humbly begin to obey God’s Word is Christian love – an unshakable trust in our Heavenly Father and a genuine compassion for one another.

1 Timothy 1:5 “But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” (NASB)

1 John 4:7-21 “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love... And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.” (NASB)

Romans 13:10 “... love is the fulfillment of the law.” (NIV)

Love is a key to all the other fruits of the Spirit. The others are either the *inward results* or *outward expressions* of love for God and humanity. As we concentrate on loving the Father and demonstrating that love in the way we treat one another, the other fruits of the Spirit begin to ripen until our lives become a garden, rooted in God’s Word and tended by God’s Spirit.

Colossians 1:3-12 “We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all... we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.” (NASB)

Isaiah 58:2-11 “... seek Me day by day and delight to know My ways... Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth; and your righteousness will go before you; the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am...’ Then your light will rise in darkness and your gloom will become like midday. And the LORD will continually guide you, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, and give strength to your bones; and you will

**be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.”
(NASB)**

Joy and Peace.

The next two fruits of the Spirit – Joy and Peace – are what this work is all about. They are the two *inward results* of love for God and mankind. The remaining fruits (patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control) are the *outward expressions* of love for God and mankind; that is, how Jesus’ love in us is made known to the outside world. Love creates Joy and Peace within our hearts, and we express this Joy and Peace by being patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled.

1 Corinthians 13:4-8 “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails...” (NIV)

The Joy God wants His children to experience is declared in the Bible to be “inexpressible.” Peace is described as “surpassing comprehension.” How do we begin to illustrate something the Word of God describes like that? At this point in our study, we are not ready to try! We’re still laying the groundwork necessary in order to understand the biblical concepts of Joy and Peace, which are different from the secular meanings of the words, so we will move on to the other fruits of the Spirit and come back to Joy and Peace in the last chapter. When we do, hopefully we will have gained a foundation of biblical truth that, with the help of God’s Spirit, will allow us to catch a glimpse of things God’s Word describes as indescribable.

1 Peter 1:3-8 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope... and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory,” (NASB)

Philippians 4:6,7 “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (NASB)

Patience.

The Greek word used for patience in Galatians 5:22 is *makrothumia*, which is a compound of two other Greek words: *makros*, meaning “long” or “enduring,” and *thumos*, meaning “temperament” or “thought.” Put them together and we get something along the lines of: Thinking that endures.

Makrothumia was used in the ancient military to describe the ability to endure hardship for long periods of time, without giving in to despair or making bad decisions. It meant thinking under pressure, with the result of steadfastness during suffering or testing. Patience prevented the soldier from giving in to stress, or retreating when times got tough. The soldier did not react to setbacks suffered in battle. Instead, he remained cool, confident, and thoughtful, which resulted in the ability to recover and adjust to change or disaster.

The fruit of the Spirit of patience works the same way. The Holy Spirit gives us the strength to think and properly apply God's Word during adversity. This is the biblical concept of patience. When times get tough, we are able to patiently rest in the promises of our Heavenly Father.

Psalm 37:7-11 “Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him; do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, because of the man who carries out wicked schemes. Cease from anger and forsake wrath; do not fret; it leads only to evildoing. For... those who wait for the LORD... the humble... will delight themselves in abundant prosperity.” (NASB)

Patience must be expressed towards both God and other people. Patience towards God is an expression of our love for God. During times of uncertainty, we trust God and wait patiently on Him.

Hebrews 6:12-15 “... imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised. When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying, ‘I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.’ And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised.” (NIV)

Patience towards others is an expression of love for others. When someone is unkind, we are not unkind in return. Instead, we are patient and treat the other person with kindness and forgiveness.

Colossians 3:12,13 “... clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” (NIV)

Ephesians 4:1,2 “... live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.” (NIV)

Proverbs 19:11 “A person's wisdom yields patience; it is to one's glory to overlook an offense.” (NIV)

Proverbs 16:32 “Better a patient person than a warrior, one with self-control than one who takes a city.” (NIV)

Kindness (the next fruit of the Holy Spirit) and patience are close kin. We often see these two virtues mentioned together in the Bible. Generally, patience relates to an inward motivation (of love for God) while kindness describes an outward expression (of that same love for God). When someone is unkind, love for God motivates patience. Patience prevents us from reacting impulsively and striking back in anger, then expresses itself in kindness.

2 Corinthians 6:3-6 “We put no stumbling block in anyone’s path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way... in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love;” (NIV)

1 Thessalonians 5:14,15 “... be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.” (NIV)

Proverbs 15:18 “A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict, but the one who is patient calms a quarrel.” (NIV)

There is something very important to catch here, and it can have a tremendous impact if we will let it sink in. *The fruit of the Spirit will prevent problems from developing in our lives.* When the virtues we are about to examine are consistently a part of the way we choose to live, it’s like a battlement that prevents all disasters from reaching us. It’s a super-antibiotic that will allow no disease to take up residence in our bodies. It’s a ring of 300 pound bodyguards that won’t let the bad guys anywhere near us.

Think about it. If we react to unkindness and are just as unkind in return, we eventually have nothing but problems. First, our relationship with God will be damaged because we have sinned. Second, our relationship with the other person will be damaged because we are fighting with each other rather than loving one another. And finally, we will have missed a great opportunity to be a light in the darkness of the world. The love of Christ could have manifested itself in our patience and kindness towards the other person and illuminated all those around us. Instead, we must confess our sin to God, attempt to repair our broken relationship with the other person, and then try to undo the damage we have done to our reputation. It’s hard to accurately represent Jesus to the world when we have a reputation for being just as big of a jerk as the next guy.

2 Timothy 2:22-26 “... pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. But refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels. The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will.” (NASB)

Proverbs 25:15 “Through patience a ruler can be persuaded, and a gentle tongue can break a bone.” (NIV)

Proverbs 26:4 “Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you yourself will be just like him.” (NIV)

1 Peter 2:12-15 “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God... For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.” (NIV)

It takes ten times more energy and work to solve the problems caused by impatience than it does to avoid the problems in the first place by being patient. And as we will see, this is how all of the fruits of the Holy Spirit work in our lives. They are not particularly easy. It will be difficult to treat a rat with kindness and integrity. But it will be a lot easier than going back and trying to solve all the problems we cause when we get down in the sewer with the vermin.

1 Peter 2:17-23 “Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king. Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable. For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously;” (NASB)

Proverbs 11:5,6 “The righteousness of the blameless will smooth his way, but the wicked will fall by his own wickedness. The righteousness of the upright will deliver them, but the treacherous will be caught by their own greed.” (NASB)

When we are patient, we listen to God’s Word, pray, and trust God. When we are impatient, we reject God’s Word, speak against Him, and doubt Him. Notice neither patience nor impatience is a passive act. Patience is active. It requires thought, faith in God’s Word, and an outward expression of trust in God and kindness towards the other person.

Psalm 40:1-4 “I waited patiently for the LORD; and He inclined to me and heard my cry... How blessed is the man who has made the LORD his trust, and has not turned to the proud, nor to those who lapse into falsehood.” (NASB)

Patience is not laziness, indifference, or inaction. These are the passive acts of a person with no character or conviction. Patience is not self-pity or moping around feeling sorry for ourselves. These are the acts of a person with no faith that the Lord

has a purpose and will provide. Patience is confidence in God that provides us with courage to meet the difficulties in life with Joy and Peace.

Hebrews 6:10-12 “God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him... We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.” (NIV)

Kindness.

The Greek word used for kindness in Galatians 5:22 is *chrestotes*, from the root *chrestos*, which means: Suitable, useful, pleasant, easy. The word suggests something that fulfills its appointed purpose in a pleasing, satisfying way, without harshness or unpleasantness. Kindness therefore implies: Behavior suitable to accomplish a specific objective with ease. What is the objective of our behavior as followers of Christ? To share with others who Jesus is and what He has done. What behavior is suitable to accomplish this objective with ease? Kindness!

Proverbs 19:22 “What is desirable in a man is his kindness...” (NASB)

Proverbs 31:10,26 “An excellent wife, who can find? For her worth is far above jewels... She opens her mouth in wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.” (NASB)

When we are kind to others, the love of God shines through us. One of the most wonderful things about God is that He treats us with untold kindness, even when we do not deserve it. As the second member of the Trinity, Jesus is God incarnate. He is God in the flesh. Therefore, Jesus is the embodiment of infinite kindness, and we, as His followers, are to display this same kindness towards others so they too may come to know the kindness of God.

Luke 6:35,36 “But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (NASB)

Psalms 36:5-9 “Your lovingkindness, O LORD, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness reaches to the skies... And the children of men take refuge in the shadow of Your wings. They drink their fill of the abundance of Your house; and You give them to drink of the river of Your delights. For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 4:4-10 “... the god of this world (*Satan*) has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God... For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but

not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.” (NASB)

Jesus displayed the ultimate act of kindness when He went to the cross. He came to earth and gave us a message of love and redemption, and we beat Him, spit on Him, scourged Him, mocked Him, and then crucified Him on a cross. And what was His response? Indescribable kindness! He bore the sins of the world.

1 John 3:16-24 “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth... this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. The one who keeps God’s commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.” (NIV)

It is this ultimate act of kindness that draws us to Jesus, and on a much smaller scale, it is our acts of kindness that draw a lost world to us as followers of Jesus. Kindness is one of the most startling, powerful forces on earth! When someone sees you treating others with kindness, immediately you gain three things: their attention, respect, and objectivity. That’s what you need to tell others about Christ, and only kindness can make it happen.

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12 “... you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other... Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders...” (NIV)

Proverbs 11:16,17 “A kindhearted woman gains honor, but ruthless men gain only wealth. Those who are kind benefit themselves, but the cruel bring ruin on themselves.” (NIV)

When we are kind in any circumstance – during ordinary day-to-day activities, when others are in need, and especially when others are hostile to us – we stick out like a sore thumb. People can’t help but notice we are different, and they can’t help but admire us. They are drawn to us with goodwill and will listen to what we have to say with an open mind. In this way, kindness allows us to accomplish our objective (to share Christ) with ease. The love of Christ shines through kindness.

Unkindness rips it to shreds! No one is going to listen to a word we say if we are just as unkind and cruel as the rest of the world. Why should they? Self-righteous and judgmental attitudes destroy the Christian’s ability to accomplish his or her mission. It makes telling others about Jesus with success nearly impossible.

Romans 2:1-24 “Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things... do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?... You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? For ‘THE NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF YOU,’ just as it is written.” (NASB)

But kindness is sweet, satisfying, and fulfilling. We thirst for it like a fine wine. It is not bitter or distasteful, repellent to those it is intended to benefit. It opens the minds of the unbelieving and makes sharing Christ easy.

Proverbs 3:3,4 “Do not let kindness and truth leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. So you will find favor and good repute in the sight of God and man.” (NASB)

Unkindness in Christians distorts the unbelieving world’s perception of Jesus. They figure this guy can’t be much if His followers are a bunch of hateful, judgmental, self-righteous thugs. Kindness presents Jesus’ true image, because we behave as He behaves.

2 Timothy 2:24 “And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful.” (NIV)

Ephesians 4:29-32 “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up... Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (NIV)

That’s why God commands us to be kind. It’s the easiest, most suitable way to tell others about Jesus. God does the dirty work. God’s Spirit convicts the unbelieving world of sin and evil, and develops patience and kindness in the hearts of God’s children, so the world will be drawn to the light they see in us like a moth to flame. Then we get the fun part. We get to tell a weary soul of the love and redemption found in Jesus and share in the Joy and Peace born in the heart of a new believer. This is an expression of God’s kindness towards us. He says: “I will convict the world of its sin and create an unquenchable thirst in their souls for a message of forgiveness. Then in your kindness they will catch a glimpse of my Son and seek you out, and you can give them of the message of life.” How generous of God! How magnanimous and kind!

John 16:8 “And He (*the Holy Spirit*), when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment;” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 3:3 “... you are a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.” (NIV)

Matthew 5:14-16 “You are the light of the world... Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” (NASB)

Titus 2:10 “... in every way... make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.” (NIV)

How self-righteous, judgmental Christians screw this wonderful plan up! Every time we condemn, hate, and judge the world we are supposed to illuminate, we close already suspicious minds. We give the world a pre-indisposition towards our Savior. We are supposed to be a light to the world, not a voice of judgment. The Holy Spirit convicts people of sin because He knows how to do it at just the right time, in just the right measure. As a result, all we have to do in presenting the good news about Jesus is recognize the problem of sin that God’s Spirit has already made real in the unbeliever’s heart, then eagerly move on to the message of redemption and peace, which the unbeliever hasn’t heard, yet longs for.

Proverbs 14:21,31 “It is a sin to despise one’s neighbor, but blessed is the one who is kind to the needy... Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.” (NIV)

Philemon 1:6 “... be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

If we sit around judging and condemning others, we rarely get the chance to give a message of peace (because who wants to sit around and listen to a bunch of self-righteous Christians?), and even when we do, people don’t listen well because they dislike us. But kindness oils the gears of human interaction, so things run smoothly, pleasantly, with ease and grace. Then opportunities to tell willing minds about Jesus overflow into our lives. Since genuine kindness is so unusual in this fallen world, it commands the attention, respect, and objectivity of friend and foe alike, which makes for dramatic opportunities to witness effectively for Christ that might never occur otherwise.

Proverbs 12:25 “Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up.” (NIV)

Romans 14:13 “Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.” (NIV)

Notice God is kind towards us, and in turn we are kind towards others. The Bible never speaks of us being kind towards God. In the Bible, kindness is expressed towards an equal or subordinate, never towards a superior. Therefore, we are not to be kind to God; we are to love Him. Our love for God is expressed in trust, because He is worthy of our trust. Our love for other people is expressed in kindness,

whether or not they are worthy of kindness. It is blasphemous to even think we could be kind to God, because He is so superior to us He has no need for our kindness, although He delights in our love. It is ridiculous to think we should place our trust in mankind, because ultimately no man or woman is worthy of our trust, although every man and woman benefits from kindness.

1 Corinthians 2:5 "... your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God." (NASB – 1975 ed.)

Jeremiah 17:5-8 "This is what the LORD says: 'Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the LORD. That person will be like a bush in the wastelands; they will not see prosperity when it comes. They will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives. But blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.'" (NIV)

Psalms 41:9-12 "Even my close friend, someone I trusted, one who shared my bread, has turned against me. But may you have mercy on me, LORD; raise me up... Because of my integrity you uphold me and set me in your presence forever." (NIV)

Perhaps the greatest enemy of the Christian cause is an unkind, self-righteous, judgmental Christian. The greatest champion is a believer with the fruit of the Spirit. You will never do more damage to the world's perception of Jesus than when you become self-righteous, judgmental, or mean-spirited. You will never have more opportunities to tell the world about Christ or to encourage fellow believers, than when you treat all those you meet with kindness and integrity.

Hosea 4:1 "Listen to the word of the LORD, O sons of Israel, for the LORD has a case against the inhabitants of the land, because there is no faithfulness or kindness or knowledge of God..." (NASB)

Proverbs 19:17 "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward them for what they have done." (NIV)

Goodness.

The Greek word for goodness in Galatians 5:22 is *agathosune*, which describes a thoughtful, benevolent act carried out for the benefit of another. Kindness relates generally to how we *speak* to others, our disposition towards them as individuals. Goodness relates to what we *do* for others, our actions performed for their benefit. Acts of goodness complete and confirm words of kindness.

Agathosune is derived from a root word *agathos*, meaning: A good, honorable, or benevolent character, which motivates good, honorable, or benevolent actions.

These good deeds in turn inspire admiration and gratitude from those who benefit from the actions.

For example, God is good. Over and over again throughout the Bible, God is called “good” and His actions on our behalf are called “goodness.” God’s loving character motivates Him to merciful and compassionate acts towards sinful mankind. And in response, we are grateful and loving towards Him.

Psalm 145:1-21 “I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever... One generation commends your works to another... They celebrate your abundant goodness and joyfully sing of your righteousness. The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made... The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does. The LORD upholds all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down... You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing... The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them. The LORD watches over all who love him... My mouth will speak in praise of the LORD. Let every creature praise his holy name for ever and ever.” (NIV)

Psalm 31:14-24 “... I trust in you, O LORD; I say, ‘You are my God.’... How great is Your goodness, which You have stored up for those who fear You, which You have wrought for those who take refuge in You, before the sons of men! You hide them in the secret place of Your presence from the conspiracies of man... LORD preserves the faithful and fully recompenses the proud doer. Be strong and let your heart take courage, all you who hope in the LORD.” (NASB)

Psalm 27:1-14 “The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?... false witnesses have risen against me, and such as breathe out violence. I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the LORD... Wait for the LORD; be strong and let your heart take courage; yes, wait for the LORD.” (NASB)

Psalm 25:1-9 “To You, O LORD, I lift up my soul. O my God, in You I trust... none of those who wait for You will be ashamed... Make me know Your ways, O LORD; teach me Your paths. Lead me in Your truth and teach me, for You are the God of my salvation; for You I wait all the day. Remember, O LORD, Your compassion and Your lovingkindnesses, for they have been from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to Your lovingkindness remember me, for Your goodness’ sake, O LORD. Good and upright is the LORD; therefore He instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in justice, and He teaches the humble His way.” (NASB)

As we learn and live by God’s Word, God’s Spirit creates the fruit of goodness in our hearts. Our love for God inspires us to good deeds for the benefit of others. Not only do we speak kindly to those we encounter, but also we follow through with acts of goodness on their behalf. In this way, goodness demonstrates that kindness is genuine, not phony. And actions speak louder than words! It is one thing to speak

with kindness, but when our words are backed up with good deeds that require effort and sacrifice, the purity of our motives cannot be questioned. Then, just as we are drawn to God for His acts of goodness, others are drawn to us for our acts of goodness. Thoughtful, benevolent acts cause others to look on us with favor and appreciation, which in turn provide powerful opportunities to share Christ.

Titus 2:13,14 “... Jesus Christ... gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.” (NIV)

Ephesians 2:10 “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Matthew 5:14-16 “You are the light of the world... Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” (NASB)

1 Peter 2:12,15 “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God... For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.” (NIV)

Titus 2:7,8 “In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.” (NIV)

Titus 3:1-14 “Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone... stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone. But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless... Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order to... not live unproductive lives.” (NIV)

Faithfulness.

Faithfulness is *pistis* in the Greek, which has different meanings depending on how it is used in a sentence. It can be translated as either “faith” or “faithfulness.”

In its active sense, *pistis* means an act of faith, or believing in something or someone, as in accepting Christ as Savior. If this is how *pistis* is used, it is translated “faith.” See Mark 11:22; Luke 7:50; Galatians 2:16.

In its objective sense, *pistis* describes the object of faith, or what is believed in, referring to God’s Word (just as today when we ask, “What is your faith?” we are asking, “What do you believe in?”). If *pistis* is used in this objective sense to refer to the truths contained in the Bible, it is again translated “faith.” See 1 Timothy 4:1; Ephesians 3:17; James 2:17.

Finally, *pistis* may be used in an attributive sense to describe a person who behaves faithfully or in a trustworthy manner. In this case, *pistis* is translated “faithfulness.” This is how the word is used in Galatians 5:22.

Faithfulness is one of the most wonderful things about God. We fail Him so many times, yet He always forgives and renews a repentant heart, because He is faithful. We learn to trust and depend on Him, because we experience His faithfulness. Our world would literally fall apart were it not for the faithfulness of God. But because we know Him to be faithful, we find a rock upon which to anchor every hope and calm every fear.

Lamentations 3:21-25 “This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. The LORD’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. ‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I have hope in Him.’ The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him.” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 10:13 “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.” (NASB)

1 Peter 4:19 “Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

Romans 3:3,4 “What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God’s faithfulness? Not at all!...” (NIV)

2 Timothy 2:13 “If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.” (NASB)

1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (NASB)

Hebrews 10:22-24 “let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings... Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,” (NIV)

As we choose to learn and live by God’s Word, God’s Spirit enables us to likewise act with faithfulness. We are steadfast and true. If we commit ourselves to some good deed, we are faithful to our promise. As with the other fruits of the Spirit, this gains the respect of outsiders and provides opportunities to tell others about Jesus. When people see us being patient and kind and promising to perform some good deed on their behalf, and then faithfully fulfilling our word, they know we are one in a million, and they will want to know how we can be so loving. From there, sharing Jesus is the easiest thing in the world.

Proverbs 12:22 “Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who deal faithfully are His delight.” (NASB)

Proverbs 28:20 “A faithful person will be richly blessed, but one eager to get rich will not go unpunished.” (NIV)

Unfaithfulness is one of the worst attributes a Christian can have. It means we are undependable, or worse, hypocritical, people who say the right thing but then don't have the character to live by our words. As with unkindness, unfaithfulness brings skepticism and slander upon the name of Christ, and makes it a hundred times more difficult to effectively tell people about Jesus. Beware! God does not fail to discipline the unfaithful.

Proverbs 14:14 “The faithless will be fully repaid for their ways, and the good rewarded for theirs.” (NIV)

Proverbs 13:2,15 “From the fruit of their lips people enjoy good things, but the unfaithful have an appetite for violence... Good judgment wins favor, but the way of the unfaithful leads to their destruction.” (NIV)

Proverbs 11:6 “The righteousness of the upright delivers them, but the unfaithful are trapped by evil desires.” (NIV)

Proverbs 25:19 “Like a broken tooth or a lame foot is reliance on the unfaithful in a time of trouble.” (NIV)

Psalms 119:89,90,158 “Your word, LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens. Your faithfulness continues through all generations... I look on the faithless with loathing, for they do not obey your word.” (NIV)

Matthew 23:1-24 “Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ‘The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them... Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.’ ” (NIV)

Proverbs 20:6 “Many claim to have unfailing love, but a faithful person who can find?” (NIV)

As in all things, Jesus is our example. He was faithful in everything He did, even to the point of dying on the cross. But because of His faithfulness, God has turned all authority over to Him. In the same way, faithfulness in our character allows God to bless us in this life and in eternity.

Hebrews 3:1,2 “Therefore... fix your thoughts on Jesus... He was faithful to the one who appointed him...” (NIV)

Revelation 19:11-16 “I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns.

He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. 'He will rule them with an iron scepter.' He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS." (NIV)

Luke 16:10,11 "He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much. Therefore if you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous wealth, who will entrust the true riches to you?" (NIV)

Matthew 25:14-30 "Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.' His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' The man with two bags of gold also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.' His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.' His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' " (NIV)

2 Samuel 2:6 "May the LORD now show you kindness and faithfulness..." (NIV)

Gentleness.

The Greek word used for gentleness is *prautes*, which describes an amiable temperament free from harshness, bitterness, or violence. It is tenderness in dealing

with other people. In the Bible, gentleness relates to the manner in which we are commanded to present truth to the unbelieving world and fellow Christians. Patience, kindness, goodness, and faithfulness create opportunities for us to share Jesus with others. Gentleness ensures we capture these opportunities effectively.

2 Timothy 2:24,25 “The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition...” (NASB)

Gentleness respects freewill. God does not force His grace upon mankind, nor does He want His servants to try on His behalf. Throughout the Bible, God always presents His grace with gentleness and tenderness, and allows His creation to choose for or against Him. When Christ came to earth, He presented Himself and His message with gentleness, then allowed the people to make a choice. As God’s servants, we are to present God’s Word with the same gentleness and respect for the right of people to choose. God does not bully or intimidate, and neither should His children.

1 Kings 19:11,12 “The LORD said (*to Elijah*), ‘Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.’ Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.” (NIV)

Matthew 11:28-30 “Come to me (*Jesus*), all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (NIV)

Matthew 21:5 “... See, your king (*Jesus*) comes to you, gentle and riding... the foal of a donkey.” (NIV)

1 Thessalonians 2:6-12 “... as apostles of Christ we... we proved to be gentle among you... we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.” (NASB)

Gentleness keeps us from becoming self-righteous or judgmental. When we present the truth to those we meet gently with reverence, it is much more difficult to become self-righteous about ourselves or judgmental towards others. Gentleness checks anger and bitterness, two traitorous guides that lead our message away from helpfulness and truth, strait to the road of hypocrisy and intimidation.

James 3:13-17 “Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom... the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.” (NASB)

Titus 3:1-5 “Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone. At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us...” (NIV)

Gentleness gains respect. As with kindness, goodness, and faithfulness, people respect those who can express themselves clearly and thoughtfully without becoming hateful or mean-spirited. And with respect comes objectivity. Gentleness causes people to evaluate our *message*, rather than our *misbehavior*, and that’s what we want!

1 Peter 3:15,16 “But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.” (NIV)

Colossians 3:19 “Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.” (NIV)

Proverbs 15:1,2 “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise makes knowledge acceptable, but the mouth of fools spouts folly.” (NASB)

Proverbs 25:15 “Through patience a ruler can be persuaded, and a gentle tongue can break a bone.” (NIV)

If you are discussing religion or the Bible with someone and for whatever reason you sense yourself becoming frustrated, angry, or judgmental – stop right there – cool down, then continue on with gentleness. You will avoid all the problems a “hot head” can cause, and you will make it much easier for the other person to respond to the truth. This does not mean you cannot be animated or passionate. On the contrary, by all means, if that is consistent with your personality, bring the roof down! But never be mean-spirited. We are here to love one another and let Christ’s love shine through us. Only gentleness and the other fruits of the Spirit can do that.

Ephesians 4:1,2,32 “... live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.” (NIV)

1 Timothy 6:11,12 “But you, man of God... pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith...” (NIV)

1 Peter 3:4 “... the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit... is precious in the sight of God.” (NASB)

Matthew 5:5 “Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.” (NASB)

Self-Control.

Finally we come to self-control, *egkrateia* in the Greek, “to have authority over mind, body and emotions,” and therefore, life. Greek philosophers used this word in their writings to describe one of the chief virtues of man. It relates to self-discipline – control of our thoughts, words, and deeds.

2 Timothy 1:6,7 “... fan into flame the gift of God... For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.” (NIV)

There are two sides to the Biblical concept of self-control. It means not doing what is inappropriate, but that is only half of it. It also means doing what we are supposed to do. Self-control is not refraining from sin, and then sitting around doing nothing. Nor is it doing good, while also freely sinning. Self-control is both refraining from sin *and* doing good.

Titus 2:1-15 “You, however, must teach what is appropriate to sound doctrine. Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance. 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 urge 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. Similarly, encourage the young men to be self-controlled. In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us... so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive... For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. These, then, are the things you should teach...” (NIV)

Self-control is mentioned last, but it is certainly not least. It is extremely important. In fact, self-control is what guarantees the function of the other fruits of the Spirit. If we are self-controlled, we will be consistent in learning and living by God’s Word. This is how the Holy Spirit creates Jesus’ love in us, which ultimately results in Joy and Peace, expressed through patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and gentleness. God’s Spirit gives us self-control so we can pray thoughtful, meaningful prayers based upon an accurate understanding of God’s Word. Self-control allows us to properly apply God’s Word to every facet of our lives, during both good times and bad, which allows us to fulfill the purpose God had in mind when He chose to create us.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27 “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.” (NASB)

1 Peter 4:7 “... be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

1 Thessalonians 5:5-28 “You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled... since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet... And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus... Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil... May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and He will do it... The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Self-control, like the other fruits of the Spirit, prevents problems from developing in our lives. Because we are obedient to God’s Word, we do not stumble into sin. We do not fall into all the traps that impatience, unkindness, evil, unfaithfulness, and bitterness set for us. Instead, the fruit of the Spirit controls our lives, and we find strength and comfort, even in the most difficult circumstances.

1 Peter 5:8-11 “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. And the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To Him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

2 Peter 1:2-10 “Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him... For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless

nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins... as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble;” (NASB)

When we have no self-control, we find ourselves open to every kind of temptation. If we are not consistent in living by God’s Word, we are going to be consistent in satisfying our desire to sin, which eventually leads only to misery and despair. God in His grace has given us His Spirit, to provide us the strength to control our lives, to be obedient to His Word, and share in His Joy and Peace.

Proverbs 25:28 “Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control.” (NIV)

2 Peter 2:9-22 “then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority. Daring, self-willed... like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge... suffering wrong as the wages of doing wrong. They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are stains and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, as they carouse with you, having eyes full of adultery that never cease from sin, enticing unstable souls, having a heart trained in greed, accursed children; forsaking the right way, they have gone astray... For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved. For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, ‘A DOG RETURNS TO ITS OWN VOMIT,’ and, ‘A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire.’ ” (NASB)

2 Timothy 3:2-17 “For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control... You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of... and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” (NASB)

Galatians 6:9 “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” (NIV)

Spiritual maturity.

As we choose to learn and live by God's Word, God's Spirit enables us to love (God and one another). When we love, Joy and Peace flow into our hearts, and patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control flow out of our hearts. Together these qualities prevent problems from developing in our lives. A loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, self-controlled person will stay out of all the trouble hate, misery, despair, impatience, unkindness, evil, faithlessness, harshness, and lawlessness inevitably bring. And the fruit of the Spirit allows us to most effectively serve our Lord and illuminate our world.

Notice you can't have one fruit of the Spirit but not the others. Nor can you have eight of them and skip one. It's all or nothing. The individual fruits of the Spirit work together as an integrated whole, and if one is missing, they all are missing. You can't be patient and unkind. You can't be good and faithless. And as we shall see, you can't know Joy but not Peace. That's why Galatians 5:22,23 calls it the *fruit* (singular) of the Spirit, rather than the *fruits*. Each quality is built up in unison, as God's Spirit empowers us to learn and live by God's Word.

Galatians 5:16-24 gives us the wonderful news that God's Spirit helps us overcome the desires of the "flesh;" that is, our nature to sin. God's Spirit enables us to learn God's Word, which tells us how to live a life that is pleasing to God. Then if we choose to be obedient to the Word, the Spirit also gives us the strength to do what the Word commands. In this way, we conquer the inward desires we sometimes have to sin.

Galatians 5:16-24 "So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want... The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control... Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." (NIV)

Notice there is nothing mystical or otherworldly about the fruit of the Spirit. God's Spirit does not sneak up and magically zap us with patience and kindness, miraculously transforming our character without us ever having to make a decision. First we have to choose to learn God's Word, so we know how to behave. Then we have to choose to be patient and kind, in what may be difficult circumstances, even when someone is a total jerk. God's Spirit will give us the strength to do all this, but we have to make the decisions and make an effort.

The Holy Spirit is not like a shot of whiskey that will on its own alter our behavior. God's Spirit is like an automobile, and God's Word is like a road map. The Spirit will take us where the Word leads, but we have to get in, read the map, and drive where we are supposed to go.

One of the most startling things about Galatians 5:22,23 is that it shows us: As we choose to learn and live by the Word of God, the Spirit of God takes our character and shapes it into the likeness of God! The behaviors described as the fruit of the Spirit are the very same behaviors attributed to God throughout the Bible. This is what it means to be a child of God: We behave like God, with the same love, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

2 Peter 1:4 "... He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust." (NASB)

Ephesians 4:22-24 "... lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and... be renewed in the spirit of your mind (*by learning God's Word*), and put on the new self (*by living by God's Word*), which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth." (NASB)

Ephesians 5:1,2 "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us..." (NASB)

1 John 3:1-24 "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!... This is how we know who the children of God are... Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister. For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another... This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth... this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us." (NIV)

We don't have the omniscient knowledge and omnipotent power of God to tell us how to live and give us the strength we need, so God gives us His eternal Word and His Holy Spirit. Then as we choose to learn and live by His Word through the power His Spirit provides, we mirror His behavior, and the world sees Him and His Son through us.

Of course we will never act with the perfection of Jesus. Unfortunately, we will fail many times. But gradually a Christ-like holiness will take shape, until we consistently

behave in the likeness of our God and Savior. *That is the point of spiritual maturity*, where (as we shall see) we find Joy and Peace, and God can use us most effectively in His plan. When we mirror God's behavior in the fruit of the Spirit, God can take us anywhere and put us anyplace, in the heights of prosperity or in the depths of adversity, and our lives will bring glory and honor to Him, happiness and blessing to us, and light to the world.

1 Peter 1:15,16 "But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'" (NIV)

1 John 4:16,17 "... God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus." (NIV)

2 Corinthians 4:2-10 "... we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God... For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body." (NIV)

2 Corinthians 3:3,18 "... you are a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts... And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (NIV)

2 Corinthians 6:16 "... For we are the temple of the living God..." (NIV)

THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT ALLOWS US TO FULFILL AND EXPERIENCE OUR DESTINY.

Lives that matter.

Following Jesus is a journey that begins when we hear the voice of God and respond to His call. We follow the voice and are led to the Son. We then make a choice, and Jesus becomes either Savior or stranger. If we receive Him as our Savior, we walk with Him side-by-side down a road where He teaches us to love, and by His Spirit we bear fruit in a fallen world that is otherwise dry and desolate. If we reject Him, He becomes a stranger, and we do not meet again until our journey's end.

When we choose to follow Jesus, He leads us down a road we neither could nor would plan for ourselves. It will undoubtedly have seasons of unexpected joys, but also unimaginable heartbreaks. Hopes and dreams will die along the way. There will be times when we will question the wisdom of our Guide and the purity of His intentions.

But if we stick with Him, we eventually discover the path we are taking leads to a pre-appointed end – a destiny – that was foreseen even before God’s voice called us from the darkness. In fact, we discover the road has been designed especially for us. The seasons of both blessing and hardship serve specific purposes we may not fully understand or appreciate until we have traveled through them. The hopes and dreams that die along the way make room for better hopes and better dreams. And the fruit we bear illuminates the landscape we leave behind, until we reach the end of the road and step through the door of eternity.

When we accept Jesus as Savior and choose to lead holy lives (by emulating the love of Jesus for God and our fellow mankind, in the light of God’s Word and through the power of God’s Spirit), our lives bear fruit. Our lives mean something. They matter, not in a superficial way, but in the very plan and purpose of eternal God for all creation. We *fulfill* our destiny, and in so doing, discover and accomplish God’s purpose for our lives. We also *experience* our destiny, coming to know the Joy and Peace God intends as we travel through life in a fallen world.

The fruit of the Spirit – the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – which characterizes our lives is the key that allows us to *outwardly fulfill* and *inwardly experience* the destiny God fashioned in eternity past when He chose to create us. We will look first at fulfilling our destiny (in Chapter 6), and finally at experiencing our destiny (in Chapter 7).

John 10:2-28 “... the shepherd of the sheep... goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice... I (*Jesus*) have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.” (NIV)

Micah 6:8 “... And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (NIV)

Jeremiah 29:11-13 “ ‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future... You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.’ ” (NIV)

Psalms 16:11 “You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.” (NIV)

Chapter 6

DISCOVERING AND ACCOMPLISHING GOD'S PLAN AND PURPOSE

(FULFILLING OUR DESTINY)

GOD HAS A SPECIFIC PLAN AND VITAL PURPOSE FOR EVERY HUMAN LIFE.

An invaluable truth.

Perhaps the most important principle to instill in the heart of every human being is: God has a specific plan and vital purpose for my life. Not just any plan – a *specific* plan. Not just any purpose – a *vital* purpose. Not for only a select few – for *every* human life, including mine. This truth should be burned into the heart of every human being: I have a destiny, fashioned by God, waiting to be fulfilled.

Ephesians 2:10 “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Philippians 2:13 “for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.” (NIV)

We are the children of the living God, and God does not give life to His kids indiscriminately. God has a reason for creating each and every one of us. We have a destiny, born in the mind of God *before time began*. In eternity past, before the creation of the heavens or the earth or any of its inhabitants, God intentionally chose to create you, me, and every other person who has ever or will ever walk the face of this earth. He did so because He has a plan and purpose for us as a species and as individuals, *and His plan and purpose are good*. Not in relative, human terms, but in absolute, divine terms. God’s specific plan and vital purpose for all humanity and for you specifically are infinitely, divinely, absolutely good.

God’s plan is specific.

From the broadest stroke to the tiniest detail, God’s plan for each of us is specific. It is tailor made for us by the designer of the universe and everything in it. God cares about everything in everyone’s life. This is not hyperbole. Don’t gloss over these words or treat them like a pat on the head from a patronizing uncle. Try to let them sink in. This is an expression of God’s infinite, absolute love for *you!* He cares about every problem, every victory, every dream, every disappointment. And He

understands each of them, because He walked this earth in the flesh and experienced firsthand both our joys and our struggles.

Job 10:8-12 “Your (*God’s*) hands shaped me and made me... you molded me like clay... Did you not... knit me together with bones and sinews? You gave me life...” (NIV)

Matthew 10:29-31 “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” (NIV)

Matthew 6:26-33 “Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?... So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (NIV)

Hebrews 4:15,16 “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (NASB)

God’s purpose is vital.

In the eyes of God, there are no unimportant people. God is not the least bit impressed by what is hallowed in the eyes of the world. God does not give a flip about money, power, fame, or anything the world holds dear. But He treasures the love held fast in a humble heart more than all the riches in all the world.

1 Samuel 16:7 “... for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” (NASB)

1 Peter 3:4 “... the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit... is precious in the sight of God.” (NASB)

God cares as much about the church janitor as He does about the senior pastor, and as much about the meter maid as He does about the President of the United States. He truly does! Once again, this is not fluff. This is unequivocally declared in the living Word of God, and God means what He says. This truth must bite into our souls like the teeth of a bear trap. It must penetrate our thick skulls if we are ever going to know the Joy and Peace God intends for us.

Luke 21:1-4 “As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. ‘Truly I tell you,’ he said, ‘this poor widow has put in more than all the others.

All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.’ ” (NIV)

Matthew 11:25 “At that time Jesus said, ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.’ ” (NIV)

Jeremiah 9:23,24 “Thus says the LORD, ‘Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,’ declares the LORD.” (NASB)

God’s plan and purpose include everyone.

God has a plan and purpose for every single one of us. There is not a child born on earth who does not have both a specific plan and vital purpose fashioned for him or her by the hand of almighty God. God loves all of His children – repeat, all of His children – with an infinite, absolute love, embodied in the person of Jesus Christ and demonstrated by His death on the cross.

1 Timothy 2:3,4 “... God our Savior... desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (NASB)

2 Peter 3:9 “The Lord is... patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (NIV)

Romans 5:8 “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (NIV)

God’s plan and purpose are preordained.

God is not making things up as He goes along. God does not run human history by the seat of His pants. He planned the entirety of human history, from Adam’s first breath to the beginning of the eternal state, before He began to create anything. There are no surprises with God. He knows what was, what is, what will be, and what could have been. And He knew all of this before time began.

Isaiah 46:9-11 “... I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure’... Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it.” (NASB)

Ephesians 1:4 “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight...” (NIV)

Psalms 139:1-16 “... LORD... you know me... For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made... Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days

ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”
(NIV)

Matthew 6:8 “... your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” (NIV)

God's plan and purpose are good.

God's intentions for His children are holy, loving, and good, just as God Himself is absolute, infinite holiness, love, and goodness. God's plan and purpose for our lives are better than anything we could ever plan or purpose for ourselves. And God sees what we cannot: How His plan for our lives as individuals intertwines with and adds beauty to the design of the fabric of the whole of human history.

Psalm 25:4-9 “Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long. Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you, LORD, are good. Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.” (NIV)

Jeremiah 29:11-13 “ ‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future... You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.’ ” (NIV)

John 15:16 “... I (*Jesus*) chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last...” (NIV)

Ephesians 3:20-21 “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.” (NIV)

Now here's the kicker...

God's plan and purpose can be rejected.

Amidst these encouraging truths regarding God's plan and purpose for our lives, we cannot forget something of fundamental importance: Each and every one of us possesses freewill. The specific plan and vital purpose preordained by God for the good of every person can be flat out rejected by you and me at any time we like. God plans and fashions together purpose for our benefit, but we receive or reject His will as we please. God shapes a destiny for us, and as we shall see, He provides everything we need in order to discover and accomplish it, but whether we fulfill our destiny is ultimately up to us. It's our choice.

Luke 7:29,30 “When all the people and the tax collectors heard this, they acknowledged God's justice... But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves...” (NASB)

2 Thessalonians 2:10 “... They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.” (NIV)

Ephesians 4:18,19 “They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Romans 1:24,25 “Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts... For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.” (NASB)

Think of someone we revere, for example: Abraham, Moses, John the Baptist, or the apostle Paul. They each had a destiny, a specific plan and vital purpose that God preordained for their good, and by the grace of God they fulfilled their destinies. They definitely had their ups and downs. They weren't perfect to say the least. Each without exception made *serious* mistakes along the way. But they persevered and fulfilled their destinies by choosing to follow God, even after terrible failures.

Now think of someone we revile: Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, one of any number of serial killers or terrorists. They each had a destiny, too. God had a specific plan and vital purpose for their lives, and it wasn't to commit the atrocities for which they are infamous. In eternity past, God chose to create them, and had something wonderful and meaningful and beautiful for them to accomplish during their time on earth. And God would have provided everything they needed to fulfill their destiny.

But somewhere along the way, these men chose a different path that led them away from God's purpose and into darkness and destruction. God did not select it for them, nor did He intend it for them, but they were free to walk it if they so desired. *Just because we have a destiny does not mean we find it.* We only find it when we seek it with a humble heart.

Acts 17:26-28 “From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being’...” (NIV)

Deuteronomy 4:29-31 “But if... you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul... For the LORD your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget...” (NIV)

Jeremiah 33:3 “Call to Me and I will answer you, and I will tell you great and mighty things, which you do not know.” (NASB)

John 7:17 “If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching...” (NASB)

Luke 11:9-13 “So I (*Jesus*) say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a

snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give... to those who ask him!" (NIV)

1 Chronicles 28:9 "... serve Him with a whole heart and a willing mind; for the LORD searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will reject you..." (NASB)

The amazing thing is: God takes even the rebellion of mankind and interlaces it like colored thread throughout His overall pattern for human history, so even the "wrath of man" only serves to deepen the beauty of His design. God places the good throughout human history exactly where He wants it; and He also places the evil throughout human history exactly where He wants it, without ever forcing us to do either one, and always advancing the ultimate purpose He intends for His creation.

Psalm 76:10 "For the wrath of man shall praise You..." (NASB)

Isaiah 14:24-27 "The LORD Almighty has sworn, 'Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will happen...' This is the plan determined for the whole world; this is the hand stretched out over all nations. For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?" (NIV)

Daniel 2:21 "It is He who changes the times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings..." (NASB)

Romans 9:17 "For the Scripture says... 'FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH.' " (NASB)

1 Corinthians 12:18 "But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired." (NASB)

This all relates to the ideas of God's Omniscience, Divine Decree, and Foreknowledge, and mankind's Election and Predestination, which we first looked at in Chapter 3. God is omniscient. He knows everything that was, is, will be, or could have been. Based on His Omniscience, God decreed a sovereign plan before the beginning of human history that brings about His purpose without ever inhibiting the freewill of His creation. This is the Divine Decree.

The Divine Decree is the basis for mankind's Election, whereby God foreknows who will accept Jesus as Savior, because He knows how each of us will freely exercise our volition. Those who choose to believe in Jesus are "elect." They are also "predestined" in that they are called to live a holy life and thereby fulfill God's divine plan and purpose.

Psalm 148:5,6 "Let them praise the name of the LORD, for at his command they were created... he issued a decree that will never pass away." (NIV)

Acts 2:23 "this Man (*Jesus*) delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God..." (NASB)

1 Peter 1:1,2 “... To God’s elect... who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father...” (NIV)

Romans 8:29 “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.” (NIV)

Ephesians 1:4-14 “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace... we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will... And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance...” (NIV)

Romans 8:28 “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” (NASB)

God’s plan and purpose are better than anything we could ever devise on our own, but it is not always what we would choose for ourselves. Nearly everyone would like to be rich, famous, and powerful, but let’s face it, not many of us are called to that. Some are called to be poor, anonymous, and without worldly influence. Most are somewhere in between.

What is important is to discover and embrace whoever God created us to be. Sometimes it takes great humility to accept the life to which we are called, because it is not always what the world tells us is desirable. But this is where the proverbial “rubber hits the road,” where we show what we are truly made of; that is, whether we believe God when He tells us that to Him, every calling is of equal significance when carried out by a humble heart.

1 Corinthians 12:12-27 “Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body – whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. Now if the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’ On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that

we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” (NIV)

Romans 12:3-18 “For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.” (NASB)

A guidepost for the human heart.

If we truly believe God’s plan for us is specific and His purpose for our lives is vital, it should give us a thrill. A chill should run down our collective spine! The Creator and Sustainer of the universe fashioned a destiny for us, and even if it is not what the world considers exalted, to God it is of utmost importance. It is essential to His plan, and it will be richly rewarded.

Hebrews 11:6 “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (NIV)

Knowing we have a destiny gives meaning to even the most mundane tasks in life, when they are carried out with honor. It provides focus and direction. And it is essential to knowing Joy and Peace within a fallen world, where not every honorable calling is justly rewarded. Turn on your television, and you can watch as this world

rewards the most asinine of behaviors. (But later in this study we will discover that the rewards this world bestows upon its great ones and tempts us with are in the end utterly unfulfilling and frighteningly impermanent for those who become addicted to them.)

Ecclesiastes 10:6 “Fools are put in many high positions...” (NIV)

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 “I (Solomon – perhaps the richest, most powerful man of his day) said to myself, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself.’ And behold, it too was futility... I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; I made gardens and parks for myself and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees... I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. Also, I collected for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men – many concubines. Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem... All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure... Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.” (NASB)

Proverbs 3:13-26 “Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her... My son, do not let wisdom and understanding out of your sight, preserve sound judgment and discretion; they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck. Then you will go on your way in safety, and your foot will not stumble. When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, for the LORD will be at your side and will keep your foot from being snared.” (NIV)

Psalms 128:1,2 “How blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in His ways. When you shall eat of the fruit of your hands, you will be happy and it will be well with you.” (NASB)

These principles are among the most important to instill in every human heart, because without them we can never truly develop self-worth and self-esteem, two virtues this world does its best to beat out of us at as early an age as possible. When we know we have a destiny, designed by God for His good pleasure and for our benefit, our lives matter. Our lives are important, regardless of what the world may say. We are who we are and what we are because that is the destiny God fashioned for us in eternity past. And to God whether we are destined to worldwide fame or the most seemingly insignificant life imaginable doesn't mean squat. What matters is: Will we choose to fulfill the destiny God fashioned for us with humility and faithfulness. (And the good news we are coming to is that when we do, the blessings we receive from God in this life and in eternity are indescribable!)

Psalm 37:16-18 “Better the little that the righteous have than the wealth of many wicked; for the power of the wicked will be broken, but the LORD upholds the righteous. The blameless spend their days under the LORD’s care, and their inheritance will endure forever.” (NIV)

James 1:9-25 “But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; and the rich man is to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away. Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him... Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow... in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves... not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.” (NASB)

1 John 2:17 “The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.” (NASB)

We now know we have a destiny. Let’s look at how we discover and fulfill it.

GOD PROVIDES US WITH EVERYTHING WE NEED IN ORDER TO DISCOVER AND FULFILL THE SPECIFIC PLAN AND VITAL PURPOSE THAT IS OUR DESTINY.

An encouraging place to start.

One of the most frustrating things can be to answer the question: What is God’s plan and purpose for my life? Nearly everyone wrestles with this question at some point, and many struggle with it for decades. The question is profound, and how we pursue the answer has far-reaching effects on our lives. It has been and will continue to be one of the primary struggles of mankind.

An encouraging place to start as we approach the subject is with the knowledge that nobody wants us to discover the answer to this question more than God. God did not fashion a plan and a purpose for every human life, only to leave us guessing as to what they are! He wants us to know. It’s important to Him. He is holy and He is love. He could act no other way. He didn’t send His Son to die for us so we could walk aimlessly upon the face of the earth. He has a plan, and He desires to reveal it.

Romans 8:31,32 “... If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (NIV)

Psalm 25:8-14 “Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. All

the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful toward those who keep the demands of his covenant... Who, then, are those who fear the LORD? He will instruct them in the ways they should choose... The LORD confides in those who fear him..." (NIV)

Psalm 23:1-3 "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake." (NASB)

Psalm 16:11 "You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence..." (NIV)

God's will: Declared and Undeclared.

In seeking the will of God for our lives, it's helpful to first distinguish in our minds between the declared will of God and the undeclared will of God. The *declared* will of God is made up of those things God expressly declares in His Word to be His will for every person's life. It is the written mandates or commands of God found in God's Word. These are black and white issues, about which there can be no debate, only obedience or defiance. Here are a few examples. You could think of others if you tried.

God commands that we:

- Accept salvation through faith in Jesus.

1 John 3:23 "This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ..." (NIV)

- Rely on the power of His Spirit.

Ephesians 5:18 "... be filled with the Spirit," (NIV)

- Learn His Word.

2 Timothy 2:15 "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth." (NASB)

- Live holy lives.

1 Peter 1:15,16 "But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'" (NIV)

- Love God.

Matthew 22:37 "Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'" (NIV)

- Love one another.

John 15:12 “This is My (*Jesus*) commandment, that you love one another...” (NASB)

- Pray.

Philippians 4:6,7 “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (NASB)

- Confess our sins privately to God in prayer.

Jeremiah 3:13-15 “Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the LORD your God... Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding.” (NASB)

- Be good citizens.

Romans 13:1 “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities...” (NIV)

- Avoid promiscuity.

Hebrews 13:4 “Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.” (NIV)

- Do not drink alcohol excessively.

Ephesians 5:18 “Do not get drunk...” (NIV)

- Be good husbands, wives, parents, and children.

Ephesians 5:25,33 “Husbands, love your wives... and the wife must respect her husband.” (NIV)

Colossians 3:20,21 “Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.” (NIV)

- Support the church financially.

1 Corinthians 16:1,2 “Now concerning the collection... each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper...” (NASB)

- Encourage fellow Christians.

Hebrews 10:24,25 “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another...” (NIV)

- Share the Gospel.

Philemon 1:6 “... be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

We also have choices to make that are not covered by a commandment expressly declared in God’s Word. Here is where we must seek the *undeclared* will of God. These are matters that require wisdom as to what would be in keeping with God’s plan and purpose for our lives. The declared will of God relates God’s will for *all mankind*. The undeclared will of God relates to God’s will for *specific individuals*. The declared will of God requires *obedience*. The undeclared will of God requires *good judgment*.

The undeclared will of God would be things like: Whom to marry, how many children to have, where to live, which profession to pursue, or which specific job to accept. These are the types of choices we usually think of and struggle with when we are seeking God’s will. Common sense tells us the answers to these questions could not be specifically contained in God’s Word. Paul would not interrupt Romans to tell John Doe to marry Jane Doe on January 1, 2030, move to London, have four children, and become a documentary filmmaker. That’s absurd. Yet God still desires to guide us in these important decisions. How does He do so?

How God reveals His will (and we discover our destiny).

A wise person said, “You can’t put God in a box,” and that’s particularly true when attempting to describe how God speaks to His children. God has many means at His disposal to reveal His plan and purpose. We will concentrate on five that are common to every life:

1. God’s Word.
2. (Natural) Abilities and (God-given) Passions.
3. Wise Counsel.
4. Circumstances.
5. God’s Spirit.

1. *God’s Word*. Of course we must begin here. The foundation for everything we know of God and His will for us is contained in God’s Word. The Bible is God’s love letter to us, wherein He pours out His heart to His children.

2 Peter 1:2-4 “Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.” (NASB)

God’s Word sets forth the declared will of God. It also provides simple but powerful principles for living that guide us towards His undeclared will. Within the pages of scripture, God reveals a way of life that shapes how we make decisions. We are to be loving, honest, forgiving, compassionate men and women, whose lives bear the fruit of God’s Spirit. This lifestyle to which we are called directs us in the choices we make, and these choices in turn point us towards God’s plan and purpose. Each individual decision to live a holy life steers us down the path God desires us to walk.

Proverbs 11:2,3 “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom. The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity.” (NIV)

1 Chronicles 29:17 “I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity...” (NIV)

Here’s an easy example. We must choose between two jobs. One is glamorous and pays a lot of money, but our boss would be a crook and require us to be crooks as well. The other position isn’t as glamorous and pays less, but it’s honest work. The principles contained God’s Word direct us to take the second job, but in so doing, our lives are pointed in the right direction. Because we took the honorable position, we meet the people God wants us to meet, we go where God wants us to go, and we do the things God wants us to do. When we make the decision God’s Word requires, we are making the right decision, because it is never God’s will for us to go against His Word.

Psalm 119:105 “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” (NASB)

Proverbs 6:22,23 “When you walk about, they *(the truths in God’s Word)* will guide you; when you sleep, they will watch over you; and when you awake, they will talk to you. For the commandment is a lamp, and the teaching is light...” (NASB)

There are also decisions that do not involve right and wrong, but good and better, and these can be much more difficult to make. To stick with the employment illustration, it’s easy to know whether to take a job as a policeman or take a job as a drug dealer. But how do you know whether to be a policeman or a fireman, a teacher or an architect, a pastor or an evangelist? How do you know where God wants you amidst all the honorable options out there?

Here is where the next four items come into play, but before we look at them we should emphasize the importance of knowing God's Word. The Word is our standard and the measure against which we must judge each of the remaining means by which God reveals His will to us. As we seek God's guidance through our natural abilities and God-given passions, the wise counsel of others, our changing circumstances, and the leading of God's Spirit, we must test what we believe we are hearing from God against the Word of God. *God will never lead us in a direction contrary to His Word.*

1 Corinthians 4:6 "... learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant..." (NASB)

Proverbs 18:2 "Fools find no pleasure in understanding but delight in airing their own opinions." (NIV)

Proverbs 30:5,6 "Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar." (NIV)

2. *(Natural) Abilities and (God-given) Passions.*

The abilities and passions God gives to each of us are important guides in discovering God's plan and purpose. They are like compass needles pointing us in the right direction when we feel lost in the darkness of a fallen world. Life can be full of confusion and fear. Our abilities and passions will bring clarity and focus when we don't know which way to turn.

It's important to keep in mind: *Who you are is not an accident.* Your inherent physical and mental abilities are not the result of a genetic crapshoot, with DNA thrown like dice at the moment of conception. God's hand guides the genetic makeup of each mind and body, imparting exactly the right qualities to each newborn child in accordance with God's eternal plan and purpose. Whatever abilities we have are knit together in our being by God Himself so we are properly equipped to accomplish His will for our lives.

Job 10:8-12 "Your (God's) hands shaped me and made me... you molded me like clay... Did you not... knit me together with bones and sinews? You gave me life..." (NIV)

Psalms 139:1-16 "... LORD... you know me... For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made... Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." (NIV)

What follows from this is: *Everyone is good at something.* We each have at least one natural ability given to us by God. If you think you are not good at anything, then you have bought into a lie this world tells everyone who will listen. God expressly

declares in His Word that each of us is granted a special gift, and if you haven't found yours, then you need to keep looking. Dig a little deeper and you will be delighted with what God reveals to you.

1 Peter 4:10 “As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” (NASB)

In the same way, *everyone cares about something*. We are all born with God-given passions, things that capture our imagination. They are exciting, fascinating, and important to us. Sometimes we are aware of them from childhood. Sometimes they find us as adults. This world will try very hard to beat the passion out of us, but if we will be still and listen, God will kindle a flame in our hearts that burns passionately for something.

2 Timothy 1:6,7 “... fan into flame the gift of God... For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.” (NIV)

This fallen world does its best to force feed you and me two massive lies:

- ❖ We're no good; and
- ❖ Nothing matters.

Why? Because when we believe these lies, we are *directionless*. Life has no aim, no purpose, and no meaning. If there is nothing we do well, then there is nothing for us to contribute. If there is nothing to be passionate about, then there is no reason for us to care. Our hearts are like a compass without a needle. We don't know which way to turn. How can we not feel lost and disillusioned?

But God has given us His Word that each of us has been granted a special ability and unique passion, and through them our life has *aim*. Our gifts and passions point us towards the bull's eye – the unique plan and special purpose of the living God for our lives. When we are sensitive to our abilities and passions, then we can point our lives in the right direction, and set our course down the path God has revealed through the way He made us from birth.

Now it becomes clear: In seeking the will of God for our lives, we need to discover two vital things:

- ❖ What we're good at; and
- ❖ What we care about.

Then we should:

- ❖ Pursue our passions,

❖ Making full use of our gifts.

God's plan and purpose for our lives will *complement* the natural abilities and unique passions He grants to us as His children. He will lead us through the way He designed us.

This is not to say, for example, that unless your job is easy and delightful, you are out of God's will. Most likely there will be times when, in order to fulfill God's plan, we will have to toil through work that can best be described as passionless drudgery, and only self-discipline, patience, and trust will get us through. What this means is: In this life we should swim *downstream* not upstream. Fashion life's journey after the manner in which God fashioned you. Don't try to be someone you were not created to be.

If there is something you truly love, which gives you a thrill every time you just think about it, that's a pretty good indication this is an area in which God might want you to be involved. The next step is for you to objectively evaluate what skills God gave you. This will tell you what kind of position you can realistically pursue in the area you are passionate about. God would not give you something you love and complementary skills, then expect you to go into an area you hate in a capacity for which you have no natural ability. God loves you too much for that! God leads by giving each of us abilities and passions, and when we pursue them with a humble heart, seeking to glorify God and fulfill His purpose, we find the life God intends for us.

Jeremiah 29:13 "You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart." (NASB)

Esther is a good example of someone in the Bible whom God led through the abilities granted to her. Esther was extremely beautiful with natural poise and charm, and these God-given qualities led to her becoming Queen of Persia. Through her royal position, God used Esther to save the Hebrews from destruction during the reign of King Xerxes (circa 482 B.C.), and in so doing, Esther fulfilled God's purpose for her life.

Esther 4:14 "... who knows but that you (*Esther*) have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (NIV)

Nehemiah is a good example of someone in the Bible whom God led through a passion. During the time of Nehemiah (circa 430 B.C.), the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon following the destruction of Israel (circa 586 B.C.). The walls of Jerusalem had been destroyed and were in rubble, which was a terrible disgrace in the ancient world. God gave Nehemiah a passion to rebuild the walls of the city, and through this passion God revealed His will for Nehemiah's life.

Nehemiah 1:4 & 2:12 “When I (*Nehemiah*) heard these things (*that the walls of Jerusalem were in ruins*), I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven... I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem (*rebuild its walls*)...” (NIV)

Now the world will tell us certain abilities and passions are better than others. Everyone wants to be beautiful, smart, athletic, and musical. And some people are all of these things. Most people aren't any of them. The great news is that to God, every gift is equally important. Some people are good with mechanical things. Some people are good with animals. Some people are good with numbers. Some people are good with people. We could go on and on. Whatever gift we have, we have received it so we can accomplish God's specific, vital purpose for our lives.

If you were born a genius, that's probably because God's plan for your life requires you to possess a high intellect. If you were never very good in school, even though you tried really hard – who cares! God's purpose for your life will complement whatever strengths you have been granted, and in order to experience the extraordinary life God intends for you, you will not be required to give lectures on quantum physics. You will only be required to be whom God created you to be.

Romans 12:5-8 “so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly... he who teaches... he who exhorts... he who gives... he who leads... he who shows mercy...” (NASB)

This is the same for every conceivable quality of body and mind. If you look like a supermodel, then God gave you your looks because His plan for your life requires it. If you are good at athletics, music, or writing, you received that gift for a purpose, to be used in God's design for His glory. On the other hand, if you are not what the world says is physically attractive, or good at sports or music or whatever, that is inconsequential to God, and to all those who seek to follow Him. What is of consequence is how you use the special gift God gave you.

James 1:9-25 “But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; and the rich man is to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away. Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him... Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow... in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely

hearers who delude themselves... not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.” (NASB)

It’s also interesting to note that not only does God grant us certain abilities, but also God uses our *disabilities* to accomplish His purpose. There are many examples throughout the Bible of God using our infirmities, even devastating heartache and loss, in order to bring about a greater good. Sometimes, God allows tragic things to happen, always because through them He can bring about tremendous good, if we will allow Him. We will explore this difficult truth in more detail later in this study.

John 9:1-3 “As he (*Jesus*) went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ said Jesus, ‘but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.’ ” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 12:5-10 “... I will not boast about myself (*Paul*), except about my weaknesses... to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (NIV)

This is an area where we must be very careful. It can be all too easy to become enraptured with the abilities God has given us, and in our efforts to develop and employ them, lose site of the One who gave them to us. We can also attempt to justify the most ridiculous decisions by claiming God has given us a passion to do something we know deep down inside is not honoring to Him. That’s why this section is captioned “Natural” Abilities and “God-given” Passions.

We all have abilities, but they can be developed to an unnatural state that robs us of the blessings they were intended to be. We all have passions, but not all of them necessarily come from God, and many reveal the darkest parts of our natures.

If you are a good athlete, don’t take steroids to become a great athlete, because you convince yourself it is God’s will for you to play professional sports. Maybe it was God’s will for you to play college sports, get an education, and become a teacher. By breaking the law, taking the drugs, and developing your gift to an unnatural level, you miss the plan of God for your life.

Objectively evaluate your talents and abilities. Sorry to break it to you, but if you are 6’7” and weigh 300 pounds, you will never be a jockey, no matter how much you love horses. Whatever abilities you have, God gave them to you for a reason. Realistically

evaluate them. Work very hard to develop them. Ask God to show you where you can use them to serve Him most, and He will.

Luke 11:9-13 “So I (*Jesus*) say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give... to those who ask him!” (NIV)

Distinguish between passions and pipe dreams. A passion is something for which you are willing to work hard and make sacrifices. You will put in hours of study and prayer, just as a start to determine if this is what you really want to do, and what God really intends for your life. A pipe dream is something you impetuously run to just to escape momentary boredom in your life, or something for which you are simply not cut out. Do not jump into something for which you are obviously unprepared or unsuited.

Never shirk your responsibilities to follow a passion. It is not God’s will for you to disregard the responsibilities you have taken upon yourself. If you have a duty to others (for example, a wife or child to support), do not abandon your responsibilities to them to pursue a passion. God loves you and through His omnipotent power He can unexpectedly lead you to His purpose in literally one second, and He can do it without you ever neglecting your duties for even one moment.

1 Timothy 5:8 “Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” (NIV)

Proverbs 20:7 “A righteous man who walks in his integrity – how blessed are his sons after him.” (NASB)

Finally, don’t allow your desire to see your passion fulfilled lead you away from God. In the pursuit of your dreams, there will be powerful forces tempting you to compromise your integrity to succeed. The glamour and allure of your passions can blind you to your ultimate aim: To fulfill God’s purpose for your life. Be aware that the area of your passions may be filled with people and pleasures that are diametrically opposed to everything you believe in, and cry out for you to join them.

Proverbs 1:10-19 “My son, if sinful men entice you, do not give in to them. If they say, ‘Come along with us...’ my son, do not go along with them, do not set foot on their paths; for their feet rush into evil... These men lie in wait for their own blood; they ambush only themselves! Such are the paths of all who go after ill-gotten gain; it takes away the life of those who get it.” (NIV)

Identify these dangers before you dive in, so you are not destroyed by them. Never let the fact that there are unbelievers or screwed-up Christians in a certain profession prevent you from pursuing your passion, if you are sure God is leading you there. If you are following what is truly God's purpose for your life, no power on earth can prevent you from getting there and being a tremendous success. (And the reason this area seems so corrupt may be that Christians are allowing a bunch of jerks to scare them away from pursuing the passions God gave them.) But also recognize the dangers and temptations inherent on the journey you are taking, and be certain you are willing to do what it takes to conquer them before you jump.

Proverbs 4:23 “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 15:33 “Do not be deceived: ‘Bad company corrupts good morals.’ ” (NASB)

For example, if your passion is the music industry, and after much prayer and consideration you believe the Lord is guiding you there – great! Go for it! But if we see you on the music channel gyrating like a drunk monkey, wearing an outfit that would make a Vegas showgirl blush, then you haven't followed God's will for your life. You have compromised your integrity, and you are missing the destiny of God to which you are called.

Everyone receives abilities and passions as a gift from God. We are then called to use them to accomplish His plan and purpose. However, we can accept the gift and reject the calling. We can take the gifts God has given us and use them for our own glory and gain, and leave the calling behind to wither in the dust. But this is not the path to knowing Joy and Peace in a fallen world. Only when we accept both the gifts and the calling do we find the life God so carefully planned for us.

Colossians 3:23,24 “Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.” (NASB)

3. *Wise Counsel.*

If abilities and passions provide general direction in life, wise counsel fills in the details. As we seek God's will, God often brings wise men and women into our lives to provide encouragement and counsel when we have difficult decisions to make. These types of friendships are a part of the blessings God wants to grant to each of us.

Proverbs 19:20 “Listen to counsel and accept discipline, that you may be wise the rest of your days.” (NASB)

Hebrews 10:24,25 “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another...” (NIV)

It's extremely important to surround ourselves with wise men and women who are firmly grounded in the truth contained in God's Word. The people we spend our time with have a tremendous influence on our lives, and we can choose to be influenced by the wise or the foolish.

Proverbs 13:20 “He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.” (NASB)

Proverbs 12:26 “The righteous choose their friends carefully...” (NIV)

How can you tell if someone is wise? Jesus warned us to beware of “wolves in sheep's clothing,” whose words will seem wise but are in fact very destructive. Perhaps the best place to start is by looking at the “fruit” of a person's life. True wisdom is reflected in the effect one's life has on the world – the legacy that is created and left behind. Examine how a person's life has affected those around them, and take this into account as you contemplate their advice.

Matthew 7:15-20 “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.” (NIV)

James 3:13-18 “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such ‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.” (NIV)

The most important thing is to test the counsel we receive from others against God's Word. The Word of God is our standard, and we should always reject any counsel that contradicts the Word. We are here to encourage and support one another, and to pass on the wisdom God has granted to us, but at the end of the day we must learn to stand on our own two feet, with the wisdom, courage, and strength that comes from a thorough understanding of the Word of God and a sensitivity to the leading of God's Spirit.

Galatians 6:2-5 “Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ...

But each one must examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another. For each one will bear his own load.” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 2:5 “... your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

Colossians 3:15-17 “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts... Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.” (NASB)

4. *Circumstances.*

God also guides us through the changing circumstances of our lives. He opens doors and closes them, and in so doing leads us down the road of life intended for us. In a sense, the changes in our circumstances provide affirmation or disaffirmation to the decisions we make or intend to make. If a certain direction is God’s will for your life, He will clear the way, affirming that your decision is in keeping with His plan. And if you are heading in the wrong direction, your Heavenly Father will put up roadblocks that make His dissatisfaction with your decision abundantly clear.

Psalms 33:10-22 “The LORD foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations. Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people he chose for his inheritance. From heaven the LORD looks down and sees all mankind; from his dwelling place he watches all who live on earth – he who forms the hearts of all, who considers everything they do. No king is saved by the size of his army; no warrior escapes by his great strength. A horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength it cannot save. But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine. We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. May your unfailing love be with us, LORD, even as we put our hope in you.” (NIV)

Proverbs 19:21 “Many are the plans in a person’s heart, but it is the LORD’s purpose that prevails.” (NIV)

Proverbs 3:5,6 “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” (NIV)

Interpreting our changing circumstances requires great wisdom. Being in God’s will does not necessarily mean life is going to be smooth sailing, and being out of God’s will does not necessarily mean we will be immediately caught up in a storm. Life in a fallen world is much more subtle than that.

Sometimes we can be on the right course, but encounter opposition from the forces working within this world to destroy all that is worthy and good. Sometimes we can be on the wrong course, and the world will (temporarily) heap mountains of rewards on us. The challenge is knowing when our changing circumstances are the result of God revealing His will or the world fighting good and rewarding evil.

Where do we find the wisdom to interpret the meaning behind the changes in the circumstances of our lives? How do we learn to discern whether God is affirming or disaffirming our decisions, or whether the world is luring us down a deadly path? The key is learning to be sensitive to the leading of God's Spirit.

5. *The Spirit.*

One purpose of the Spirit of God (who lives inside every person who believes in Jesus) is to grant us wisdom. The Spirit of God takes the Word of God we have learned and provides us with the discernment we need to properly apply truth to our changing circumstances. In this way, we come to know which decision to make in times of uncertainty.

Psalm 51:6 “Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being (*understanding of God's Word*), and in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom (*the ability to apply God's Word to our changing circumstances*).” (NASB)

Proverbs 2:3-11 “indeed, if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will... find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding... Then you will understand what is right and just and fair – every good path. For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you.” (NIV)

Proverbs 2:6 “For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.” (NIV)

Isaiah 11:2 “The Spirit of the LORD... the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might...” (NIV)

How does the Spirit impart wisdom? How do we know which way the Spirit is directing us? The answer is one of the major themes of this study: Peace. When we are making the decision that is in keeping with God's will, the Spirit of God gives us Peace – a contentment and satisfaction that is unshakable, even when the world around us is full of uncertainty and fear. The Spirit of God anoints our innermost being with a “peace beyond comprehension,” like a soothing balm on an open wound, and we gain confidence and courage that our choices are right.

Proverbs 3:13-26 “Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns

than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed... My son, do not let wisdom and understanding out of your sight, preserve sound judgment and discretion; they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck. Then you will go on your way in safety, and your foot will not stumble. When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, for the LORD will be at your side and will keep your foot from being snared.” (NIV)

Isaiah 26:3,4 “The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect peace, because he trusts in You. Trust in the LORD forever, for in GOD the LORD, we have an everlasting Rock.” (NASB)

Romans 15:13 “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (NIV)

Philippians 4:6,7 “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (NASB)

When our choices are wrong, Peace is replaced with an unrest that eventually becomes anxiety, desperation, and fear, even if our circumstances on the surface seem prosperous. We can be rich, famous, and powerful, but if we are also out of the plan of God, there will be a restlessness that grows within us like a cancer until we are consumed by it.

Revelation 3:17 “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.” (NIV)

Isaiah 59:4-8 “No one calls for justice; no one pleads his case with integrity. They rely on empty arguments and speak lies; they conceive trouble and give birth to evil... Their deeds are evil deeds... Their thoughts are evil thoughts; ruin and destruction mark their ways. The way of peace they do not know; there is no justice in their paths. They have turned them into crooked roads; no one who walks in them will know peace.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Isaiah 57:20,21 “But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. ‘There is no peace,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked.’” (NIV)

It’s through this Peace (or the lack of it) that God’s Spirit counsels us in our times of need. It becomes a gauge to show us whether we are doing God’s will. If we are truly humble and seeking to know and accomplish God’s purpose, God’s Spirit will grant us Peace. And if we are full of pride and seeking to do our own will in defiance

of God, God's Spirit will not let us rest, but will instead fill us with a growing anxiety that alerts us of our folly.

Deuteronomy 28:62-67 "... because you did not obey the LORD your God... the LORD will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life. In the morning you will say, 'If only it were evening!' and in the evening, 'If only it were morning!' – because of the terror that will fill your hearts..." (NIV)

Romans 2:9-11 "There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil... but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good... For there is no partiality with God." (NASB)

God's Word provides us with the rules by which we govern our lives. Our abilities and passions provide us with direction. Wise counsel helps fill in the details. Circumstances can either affirm or disaffirm whether we are on the right path. And God's Spirit pulls all of these things together and provides us with either a Peace or a disquiet that is inescapable to the human heart as it makes its way through the twists and turns of life. And so, in the blending of all these things, the will of God is revealed and our destinies are discovered.

Colossians 1:9-12 "... be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light." (NASB)

Philippians 1:9,10 "And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ," (NIV)

How we accomplish God's will (and fulfill our destiny).

It's one thing for God to *reveal* His will and for us to *discover* our destiny. It's quite another thing for us to *accomplish* God's will and *fulfill* our destiny. Knowing God's will and our destiny is great but ultimately meaningless unless we are willing to make the often difficult choices required to fulfill our calling. We can gaze longingly at our destiny in the distance, or we can experience it by stepping boldly out to meet it. To catch a glimpse of our destiny, we can dip our toes in the water, but to fulfill it, we have to dive in and start swimming.

Philippians 3:8-14 "... I (*Paul*) count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord... I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what

lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (NASB)

God’s will is accomplished and we fulfill our destiny when we choose to put our faith in and follow Jesus, by accepting Him as our Savior and then emulating His love for both God and one another. As Christ’s love becomes manifest in our lives, the will of God is revealed and then accomplished, and our destiny is discovered and then fulfilled. Each decision to follow Jesus gradually illuminates the path God has laid out before us. And as we walk consistently in His light, God guides us down the path leading to our destiny.

Psalm 16:11 “You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.” (NIV)

Micah 6:8 “... what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (NIV)

Ephesians 4:1-13 “... live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.” (NIV)

1 John 2:6 “... live as Jesus did.” (NIV)

Psalm 23:1-3 “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.” (NASB)

Psalm 36:9 “For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light.” (NASB)

2 Peter 1:19 “So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts.” (NASB)

Psalm 119:105 “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” (NASB)

Proverbs 3:5,6 “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” (NIV)

Isaiah 42:5,6 “This is what God the LORD says – the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: ‘I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you... a light...’ ” (NIV)

What to do in times of confusion.

We live in a fallen world, and there will be many times in our lives when we are faced with difficult decisions. What do we do when we don’t know which way to turn?

First, go to God in prayer. If you are trying to follow Jesus and truly seeking God’s guidance, take comfort in knowing that God will not fail to show you where you belong in His plan, if you will simply ask and then wait patiently for His answer. It may take some time and real searching, but “seek and you shall find.”

James 1:5 “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.” (NASB)

Luke 11:9-13 “So I (*Jesus*) say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give... to those who ask him!” (NIV)

Luke 18:1-8 “Now He (*Jesus*) was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, saying, ‘In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, “Give me legal protection from my opponent.” For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, “Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.”’ And the Lord said, ‘Hear what the unrighteous judge said; now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?’ ” (NASB)

Hebrews 11:6 “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (NIV)

Next, consider your problem in the light of your understanding of God’s Word. Ask yourself: Is this matter covered by the declared will of God? In other words: Is the answer to your problem revealed within an express commandment of God found in the Bible? If it is, the decision is easy: Obey God’s Word.

2 Timothy 2:15 “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.” (NASB)

Proverbs 6:22,23 “When you walk about, they (*the truths in God’s Word*) will guide you; when you sleep, they will watch over you; and when you awake, they will talk to you. For the commandment is a lamp, and the teaching is light...” (NASB)

1 John 2:3-5 “We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. Whoever says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them...” (NIV)

If your issue is not address in one of the clear commands of God found in the Bible, then prayerfully seek:

- *A “principled” decision.* One in keeping with the principles found in God’s Word.

- *A “complementary” decision.* One complementary to the direction in life you gain from your natural abilities and God-given passions.
- *A “counseled” decision.* One consistent with wise counsel, considered in the light of God’s Word.
- *An “affirmed” decision.* One your changing circumstances seem to affirm.
- *A “peaceful” decision.* One with which God’s Spirit leaves your heart at rest.

Make good use of the time you are waiting for God’s guidance. Use your spiritual gifts to serve Him wherever you can while you wait. Mature as a Christian so you are prepared for whatever awaits you when God finally calls. If God does not immediately answer your prayer, it may be because His plan for you is so special, you need time to grow so you are ready to handle it. It takes all of about one second for God’s sovereign, omnipotent power to dramatically change the course of your life and bring you into His purpose. Be ready when He calls!

Luke 12:35-40 “Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. Truly I tell you, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready... You also must be ready...” (NIV)

God loves you more than you will ever know! He created you with a specific purpose in mind. And it is inconceivable that He would not show you this purpose in time. He did not sacrifice the Son He loves, give you His Word, and then send you His Spirit, so you can wander around aimlessly and never find where you belong in His plan. He loves you too much for that!

Romans 8:28-39 “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose... What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?... Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NASB)

Isaiah 58:11-14 “The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail... not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in

the LORD, and I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance..." (NIV)

Psalm 23:1-6 "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." (NASB)

Psalm 37:4 "Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart." (NASB)

Pray like crazy. Be pure. Seek holiness. Be patient. Have a little talk with yourself, and be sure you are honestly seeking God's will, not your own. And in time, God will take you by the hand and lead you step-by-step right where you belong. This is the kind of God we have. He loves us with an infinite, unfailing love! It is impossible for Him to wish anything but the best for us. And He will bring about the best as we follow His Son.

Psalm 103:8-18 "The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love... he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him... with those who... remember to obey his precepts." (NIV)

Psalm 37:3-34 "Trust in the LORD and do good... delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart... trust in him and he... will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn... The LORD makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him; though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand... Hope in the LORD and keep his way. He will exalt you..." (NIV)

Ephesians 5:8-10 "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord." (NIV)

Isaiah 58:2-11 "... seek Me day by day and delight to know My ways... Then you will call, and the LORD will answer... And the LORD will continually guide you, and satisfy your desire... and give strength to your bones..." (NASB)

Isaiah 43:1-5 "But now, this is what the LORD says – he who created you... he who formed you... 'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.

When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior... Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you... Do not be afraid, for I am with you...' ” (NIV)

Isaiah 48:17 “This is what the LORD says – your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: ‘I am the LORD your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go.’ ” (NIV)

And when you are waiting for God to reveal His will, there is something very practical you can do that can dramatically affect your life: *Be faithful in the little things.*

So often we focus on our great, grandiose designs for our lives, and we neglect the basic things that are the building blocks of true greatness. The Bible is clear, God looks to see if we are willing to be faithful in very little things, before He entrusts us with very great things. Faithfulness in the little things develops the integrity we need before we can accomplish great things.

Luke 16:10,11 “He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much. Therefore if you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous wealth, who will entrust the true riches to you?” (NASB)

Matthew 25:21 “... Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!” (NIV)

David’s life is a good example. As a young man, David was a shepherd. Being a shepherd in David’s time was about the lowest job you could have, but David faithfully fulfilled his responsibilities without regard to what others thought. Part of his responsibilities as a shepherd was to learn how to use a sling to protect the sheep from wild animals. This particular skill came in pretty handy when he met Goliath. And by faithfully fulfilling what may have seemed to be insignificant responsibilities, David developed a close relationship with God, which led God to choose him to be king of Israel.

Proverbs 4:5-18 “Acquire wisdom! Acquire understanding! (*the ability to properly apply God’s Word*)... Do not forsake her, and she will guard you; love her, and she will watch over you... Prize her, and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her. She will place on your head a garland of grace; she will present you with a crown of beauty... the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, that shines brighter and brighter until the full day.” (NASB)

Isaiah 26:7 “The way of the righteous is smooth...” (NASB)

In 2 Samuel 11, David failed to fulfill his basic responsibilities as king when he stayed home in his palace and sent his troops off to battle. He should have been in the field with his men, but instead he remained in Jerusalem. There he saw a beautiful, married woman, Bathsheba, made her pregnant, and eventually had her

husband murdered. By failing to fulfill his basic responsibilities, David took himself out of the will of God and into temptation and terrible sin.

Proverbs 11:5,6 “The righteousness of the blameless will smooth his way, but the wicked will fall by his own wickedness. The righteousness of the upright will deliver them, but the treacherous will be caught by their own greed.” (NASB)

If you will choose day-by-day and minute-by-minute to live as God’s Word commands, being patient and faithful in following the little things His Word clearly requires you to do, in time your loving Heavenly Father will also clearly guide you in making every decision in life.

Psalms 25:8-14 “Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful toward those who keep the demands of his covenant... Who, then, are those who fear the LORD? He will instruct them in the ways they should choose. They will spend their days in prosperity... The LORD confides in those who fear him...” (NIV)

John 14:21 “He who has My (*Jesus*)’ commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him.” (NASB)

Psalms 16:11 “You make known to me the path of life...” (NIV)

And finally, remember this: God cares much more about *who* you are than *where* you are. What is important to Him is your character, not your job description or location on a map. He wants to know, are you being transformed into the likeness of His Son? *That* is ultimately God’s will for your life – to conform your heart and mind to the image of Christ. All the other stuff is secondary.

Ephesians 5:2 “and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (NIV)

Romans 8:29 “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 3:3-18 “... you are a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts... we... are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord...” (NIV)

Romans 12:1-18 “Therefore I (*Paul*) urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect... Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly... Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to

one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality... If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.” (NASB)

1 John 2:6 “... live as Jesus did.” (NIV)

When you begin to live as Jesus did, then God can literally send you anywhere to do anything (or keep your right where you are!), and you will fulfill His plan. Absent this change, your circumstances are irrelevant. It doesn't matter where you go or what you do, you will never accomplish the purpose God had in mind when He chose to create you. So focus on getting *who you are* right, and as you do, God will ensure that where you are, what you do, and whom you do it with all fall into perfect sync with His intricate design, for both your life and the unfolding of human history.

2 Peter 1:2-10 “Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him... For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins... as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble;” (NASB)

1 Thessalonians 5:5-28 “You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled... since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet... And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus... Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil... May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and He will do it... The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Two certainties.

Most people long for certainties in life, the experiential equivalent of mathematical constants upon which to plant our feet as we try to stand in a world that so often seeks to knock us down. Among the many certainties revealed in God's Word, there are two that are essential to understand if we are ever going to stand steady and firm amidst the jabs and sucker punches thrown at good men and women in a fallen world.

The first is a cold, hard reality of life, which every man and woman must recognize and understand if we are to make sense of the world around us. It relates to suffering, and it provides us with *caution*.

The second is a wonderful, thrilling reality of life, which every man and woman must recognize and understand if we are to thrive in the world around us. It relates to Joy and Peace, and it provides us with *hope*.

To conclude this chapter, we will take a look at the first certainty and gain an introduction to the second.

AS WE DISCOVER OUR DESTINY, WE WILL INEVITABLY ENCOUNTER SUFFERING.

An honest Father.

Our Heavenly Father loves us enough to be honest with us. In His Word, He warns His children that in this world we will inevitably encounter suffering. He also tells us this is especially true for those who are seeking to do His will.

Psalm 34:19 “Many are the afflictions of the righteous...” (NASB)

2 Timothy 3:12 “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,” (NIV)

God provides us with this warning not to frighten us, but to arm us with truth so we are prepared for the journey each of us will take from cradle to grave in a world twisted and torn by evil. We need to know that, as we follow Jesus and begin to discover our destiny, it is a matter of time before adversity strikes. This way we are not shocked or dismayed when we discover how the world truly is. Instead, we can prepare to meet the trouble we know is coming.

1 Peter 4:12-19 “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed... Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

This certainty is a reality God shares with His children so we can make sense of life when it seems unfair. To say the least, the world can be quite a perplexing place, full of questions that appear unanswerable. Like a father with his child on his knee, God warns us of the troubles we can expect from the world, but (as we shall see) He also comforts us with the grace we can expect from Him.

John 16:33 “These things I (*Jesus*) have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.” (NASB)

Why is there evil in the world?

One of the biggest questions posed by humanity throughout the ages is: If God exists, then why is there evil in the world? If God is all-powerful and all-loving, how can He allow His creation to suffer so often and so horribly? It’s a fair question, and it deserves an answer.

We’ve already addressed this to a limited extent earlier in this study. Evil exists in the world because God granted freewill to His creation. God made us free to seek Him and do good, or to reject Him and do evil. The only way God could eradicate evil from the world is to remove freewill from those who inhabit it, which as we have seen He will not do. Freewill is what makes a loving relationship with God possible, but it comes with an extraordinarily heavy price: It opens the door for evil to enter the world, and along with evil, the inevitability of suffering.

Many can grudgingly accept this explanation of why evil and suffering exists in the world. What is much more difficult to understand and accept is why God allows certain evils to afflict certain people. Many times, good people suffer and bad people prosper. How can God allow this and still declare Himself to be holy?

In what follows, we will attempt to unravel this mystery. As we move along, we will discover that while suffering is inevitable, especially for those who are attempting to follow Jesus, the evil in the world does not derail God’s plan or destroy what is good. Instead, God’s plan is advanced and good is created that is of eternal significance. God forewarns His children that they will inevitably encounter suffering, but at the same time comforts us with the unbreakable promise that through His grace we can overcome and conquer it.

Romans 8:18-39 “For I (*Paul*) consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us... creation was subjected to futility... the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves... groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body... And we know that God causes all things to work

together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose... What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect?... Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, 'FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED.' But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (NASB)

Four reasons for suffering.

"God works in mysterious ways" is a saying we are all familiar with, and in a sense this is very true, particularly in attempting to unravel the mysteries relating to human suffering. At the risk of oversimplifying one of the great mysteries of life, we will begin by looking at four reasons that are clearly described in the Word of God for why creation encounters suffering. These are not meant to answer every question relating to human suffering by neatly labeling four boxes under which to classify and file every heartache. These are simply meant to provide a general framework to help us deal with the barrage of troubles that sometimes descend upon our lives, and with the guidance of God's Spirit, help us understand what is happening and why.

Four general reasons for suffering are:

1. Bad Decisions;
2. God's Discipline;
3. Spiritual Testing; and
4. Spiritual Service.

1. *Bad Decisions.*

A first reason there is suffering (in both the world at large and in individual lives) is: Human beings make bad decisions. Our choices as a race and as individuals bring about a great portion of the suffering in the world. So much of what plagues mankind and you and me has nothing to do with an act of God, but rather the actions of selfish human beings.

Proverbs 19:3 "A person's own folly leads to their ruin, yet their heart rages against the LORD." (NIV)

Proverbs 6:27,28 “Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched?” (NIV)

Proverbs 26:27 “He who digs a pit will fall into it, and he who rolls a stone, it will come back on him.” (NASB)

Proverbs 29:6 “By transgression an evil man is ensnared, but the righteous sings and rejoices.” (NASB)

This is a natural byproduct of freewill. We each have the freedom to choose between right and wrong, and by our own wrong decisions we bring suffering to ourselves and others. And so a first step in understanding the role of suffering in the world and in individual lives is to take responsibility for the suffering we inflict upon ourselves.

2 Peter 2:9-13 “... the unrighteous... are... suffering wrong as the wages of doing wrong...” (NASB)

Proverbs 5:21-23 “For your ways are in full view of the LORD, and he examines all your paths. The evil deeds of the wicked ensnare them; the cords of their sins hold them fast. For lack of discipline they will die, led astray by their own great folly.” (NIV)

Psalms 7:12-16 “If a man does not repent... He has dug a pit and hollowed it out, and has fallen into the hole which he made. His mischief will return upon his own head...” (NASB)

Galatians 6:7 “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.” (NIV)

2. *God's Discipline.*

A second reason for suffering is: God disciplines His children. God is the perfect father, and fathers discipline the children they love. Now not everyone had a good role model for a father when they were growing up, and the way our earthly fathers treat us can greatly affect the way we expect our Heavenly Father to treat us. To some, the word “discipline” can stir memories of an unfair, cruel tyrant who terrorized his household with emotional and physical abuse, and we fear that God will deal with us in the same manner.

Thankfully, this is not how God reveals Himself to us in His Word, nor is this how God's discipline is described in the Bible. God doesn't punish us for honest mistakes, and He doesn't lob thunderbolts at us for petty sins for which we soon ask forgiveness. But when there is a pattern of intentional wrongdoing for which we are unashamed and unrepentant, our holy, loving Heavenly Father stands ready to instruct and reprove His children with a firm and fair hand.

Deuteronomy 8:5 “Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you.” (NIV)

Hebrews 12:5-11 “... DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES

HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES... God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline... He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.” (NASB)

Revelation 3:19,20 “Those whom I (*Jesus*) love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.” (NASB)

God dearly loves His children, and when He sees them taking a path of self-destruction, He will lovingly call them back to Him. But if tenderness and loving admonition are ignored, God will not hesitate to meet out fair, appropriate discipline to His erring children, with hopes of saving them from the destruction towards which they are heading.

Psalm 119:66-71 “Teach me knowledge and good judgment, for I trust your commands. Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word... It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.” (NIV)

Psalm 94:12 “Blessed is the one you discipline, LORD, the one you teach from your law;” (NIV)

Proverbs 10:8,17 “The wise of heart will receive commands, but a babbling fool will be ruined... He is on the path of life who heeds instruction, but he who ignores reproof goes astray.” (NASB)

Proverbs 19:20 “Listen to advice and accept discipline, and at the end you will be counted among the wise.” (NIV)

Job 5:17,18 “Behold, how happy is the man whom God reproves, so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. For He inflicts pain, and gives relief; He wounds, and His hands also heal.” (NASB)

It may seem harsh or mean-spirited for God to inflict pain to get us to change our ways. However, God does not want to punish us. God wants to bless us beyond our wildest dreams! That’s why He sent His Son. But we, like little children, don’t always know what is best for us. The only way to get our attention sometimes is through punishment. In the end, it’s for our own good. The alternative is for God to abandon us to the pain our bad decisions would eventually inflict, which is much more severe than disciplining us.

Proverbs 27:5 “Better is open rebuke than hidden love.” (NIV)

Psalm 141:1-10 “I call to you, LORD, come quickly to me... Set a guard over my mouth, LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips. Do not let my heart be drawn to what is evil so that I take part in wicked deeds along with those who are evildoers; do not let me eat their delicacies. Let a righteous man strike me – that is a kindness; let him rebuke me – that is oil on my head. My head will not refuse it... Keep me safe from the traps set by evildoers, from the snares

they have laid for me. Let the wicked fall into their own nets, while I pass by in safety.” (NIV)

2 Peter 3:9 “The Lord... is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (NIV)

Ezekiel 18:21-32 “But if a wicked person turns away from all the sins they have committed... None of the offenses they have committed will be remembered against them... Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?... Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit... For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!” (NIV)

Lamentations 3:31-42 “For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone... Why should the living complain when punished for their sins? Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD. Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven, and say: ‘We have sinned and rebelled...’ ” (NIV)

These first two types of suffering are *punitive* in nature, meant to punish us. They result from us intentionally making *wrong* choices, and we *can* avoid them by following Jesus and living a holy life. That’s not too hard to understand.

The next two types of suffering are (believe it or not) *beneficial* in nature, meant to bless us. They result from us intentionally making *good* choices, and we *cannot* avoid them when we are following Jesus and living a holy life. This is where life can get confusing and seem very unfair.

3. *Spiritual Testing.*

God created His children and placed them in a world where each individual is free to choose to do right or wrong. This guarantees that suffering will exist in the world. Sometimes the bad will attempt to oppress the good, and sometimes those who do evil will prosper, while those who do good will suffer. How can God allow this, and at the same time be fair with His creation?

The answer is that God uses suffering in the world the way a metal worker uses fire in a forge. Fire tests and purifies molten metal. Suffering tests and purifies the human heart. And so, a third reason for suffering is: To test us spiritually.

Proverbs 17:3 “The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tests hearts.” (NASB)

The only way God could keep us from suffering in this world is to take us out of it, which is not in keeping with His plan, so He uses suffering to further His purpose by

making it the means by which our characters are shaped and tempered. Undeserved suffering tests our hearts and allows us to learn to rely upon God's Word and Spirit, like an ancient soldier learning to rely upon a sword and shield. And our growing faith becomes the instrument by which the "flaming missiles" of suffering are parried and overcome.

Ephesians 6:10-17 "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might... take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm therefore, HAVING GIRDED YOUR LOINS WITH TRUTH, and HAVING PUT ON THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, and having shod YOUR FEET WITH THE PREPARATION OF THE GOSPEL OF PEACE; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take THE HELMET OF SALVATION, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." (NASB)

We find out who we truly are when we suffer. When things are going well, it can be easy to camouflage our innermost thoughts and feelings. But when we suffer, especially intensely over longer periods of time, the true person inevitably comes out.

1 Peter 2:18-20 "Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable. For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God." (NASB)

This is not so much for God's benefit as it is for ours. God is omniscient. He knows everything, including how we will react in any conceivable situation. Be *we* don't know how we will react in any conceivable situation, especially when trouble arrives, and so God allows us to experience the storm in order to discover and demonstrate who we truly are. Through this process of self-discovery, we are able to learn and grow, and this is God's great desire for His children – that we advance from a spiritual baby to a spiritually mature man or woman, enjoying a deep, rich, mature, and genuine relationship with Him.

Jeremiah 17:10 "I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds." (NASB)

1 Chronicles 29:10-17 "... Praise be to you, LORD... Yours, LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours... I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity." (NIV)

Deuteronomy 8:2-16 "Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He

humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna... to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD... Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you. Observe the commands of the LORD your God, walking in obedience to him and revering him. For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land... When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down... and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God... He led you through the vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions... to humble and test you so that in the end it might go well with you.” (NIV)

There are basically two types of spiritual testing:

- ❖ *Testing through relationships.* This type of testing involves problems in our relationships with other people, whether they are our enemies, our friends, or even our loved ones. The solution to relationship testing is a Christ-like love for others, demonstrated through patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (the fruit of God’s Spirit).
- ❖ *Testing through circumstances.* This type of testing involves problems that do not relate to people but rather circumstances, such as health, employment, or finances. The solution to circumstance testing is a Christ-like love for God, demonstrated through trust in Him.

Spiritual testing brings us to a point where we cannot solve our problems with our human abilities or resources (the “weakness” in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10) and must instead rely upon God. This reliance develops our relationship with God, which in turn becomes our greatest strength, with the ability to withstand the most powerful storms of life.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 “... to keep me (*Paul*) from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh... Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.” (NASB)

Matthew 7:24-27 “Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine (*Jesus*) and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed

against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell – and great was its fall.” (NASB)

Hebrews 13:9 “... It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace...” (NIV)

The purpose of spiritual testing is to allow us to grow into spiritual adults. One of the most rewarding experiences in life is to make it *through* adversity, rather than around it. By facing adversity with integrity, passing through spiritual testing, we come out on the other side with the holy character God desires us to have, and then we are ready for anything this fallen world can throw at us. In this way, God uses the fires of spiritual testing to mold our characters into His image, and in so doing, we become equipped to serve Him during this lifetime. This leads us to a fourth reason for suffering. *God tests us, so we can grow. God wants us to grow, so we can serve Him.*

1 Peter 2:2 “like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow...” (NASB)

1 Peter 1:6-8 “In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy,” (NIV)

1 Peter 4:19 “Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

2 Peter 1:3-8 “... His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him... He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature... Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (NASB)

James 1:2-4 “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (NASB)

Before we proceed, it is interesting to note the Greek word used for “testing” in James 1:2-4 is *dokimion*. This word was originally used in ancient metallurgy to describe the process of heating a precious ore, such as gold or silver, and skimming off the dross (impurities) as it rose to the surface. The metal worker knew the

purifying process was complete when he could look into the molten metal and see his reflection.

God does the same thing to us. He puts us through the fires of spiritual testing in order to purify us. When we learn to live by His Word through the strength of His Spirit during adversity, all the impurities in our soul are skimmed away like dross, and we are left with characters of purest gold. Then as God looks down and sees His children fully immersed in the fires of spiritual testing, yet reflecting back His own image through holy, Christ-like behavior, He knows the maturing process is over. We have reached spiritual adulthood and are now ready for the final purpose of suffering.

2 Corinthians 2:14,15 “... God... manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing;” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 3:3,18 “... you are a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts... And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” (NIV)

Job 23:10 “... when he (*God*) has tested me, I will come forth as gold.” (NIV)

4. *Spiritual Service.*

Passing through spiritual testing leads us to spiritual maturity, where our behavior mirrors God’s behavior. Suffering is no longer a test of who we are. All of our exams have been passed, and our holy, Christ-like characters are fully formed. As a result, a final purpose for suffering remains: To allow us to serve God.

How can we, through our suffering, serve God? When we choose to live holy lives, even during the darkest and most unfair trials of life, two amazing things happen:

- ❖ The world is illuminated; and
- ❖ God is glorified.

Matthew 5:5-46 “Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth... Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me (*Jesus*). Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you... You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven... whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the

other to him also... love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven..." (NASB)

We are born into a fallen world shrouded in darkness. As we journey through life, everyone is searching for something that will bring purpose and meaning to existence – a light in this darkness. But in the emptiness of the world, we cannot see our hands in front of our faces, let alone a path leading to a place of happiness and contentment.

Isaiah 59:9-11 "... We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows. Like the blind we grope along the wall, feeling our way like people without eyes. At midday we stumble as if it were twilight... We look for justice, but find none; for deliverance, but it is far away." (NIV)

When we trust God during times of suffering, we become beacons of light in the inky darkness of the fallen world. People are drawn to us, because they want to know why we do not fall apart like so many other people do, and what the source of our courage and strength is. It is here we have the greatest opportunity to share Jesus with others. We have a hope others do not, and we have the privilege of sharing that hope with those around us. In doing so, we serve the One who has delivered us from the darkness. We are His people, and He is our God.

Philippians 2:14-16 "Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life..." (NASB)

1 Peter 3:15 "but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you..." (NASB)

Colossians 4:5,6 "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone." (NIV)

1 Thessalonians 5:5-28 "You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober... since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that... we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up... Live in peace with each other... help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus... hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil... May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus

Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it... The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” (NIV)

1 Peter 2:10-17 “... you are the people of God... Live such good lives among the pagans that... they may see your good deeds and glorify God... Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men... For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

By choosing to trust God (rather than defy Him) when suffering comes, our lives become a living testimony to what mankind’s freewill and God’s grace can accomplish together. Our reliance is upon Jesus, and the world beholds Jesus through us.

2 Corinthians 4:4-10 “... the god of this world (*Satan*) has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God... For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.” (NASB)

When we choose to trust God during times of adversity, and God sustains us through our trials by His grace, not only is the world illuminated, but God is glorified. How? God is glorified in two ways.

First, our faith in God during times of suffering gives glory to God because through our decisions we proclaim Him to be worthy of honor and trust. When we choose to rely upon God in the darkness, we declare to all that the grace of God is greater than the darkness of the world.

Psalm 145:1-21 “I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever... One generation commends your works to another... They celebrate your abundant goodness and joyfully sing of your righteousness. The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made... The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does. The LORD upholds all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down... You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing... The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them. The LORD watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy. My mouth will speak in praise of the LORD. Let every creature praise his holy name for ever and ever.” (NIV)

Micah 7:7,8 “But as for me, I will watch expectantly for the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me... Though I fall I will rise; though I dwell in darkness, the LORD is a light for me.” (NASB)

Second, God is glorified because it is by His grace and His grace alone we are able to stand during times of suffering. We make the *decision* to trust, and God provides the *strength* to trust. Our faith prompts acts of trust that are empowered by God’s grace, and through these acts of faithfulness, God is glorified in the demonstration of His matchless grace.

2 Thessalonians 1:11,12 “... we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (NIV)

1 Peter 4:11 “... If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.” (NIV)

And be encouraged – God never gives us more than we can handle. He promises that with every test He will also provide more than enough grace so we can stand firm. When life seems darkest and you are hurting the most, if you will just trust God, *that moment can be the greatest in your life*. It is the moment your Savior will want to talk to you about most when you are with Him in heaven, the time when you trusted and glorified Him in your darkest hour.

1 Corinthians 10:13 “... God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.” (NIV)

2 Chronicles 16:9 “For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His...” (NASB)

Ephesians 6:10-13 “... be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.” (NASB)

1 Peter 4:19 “Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

Job 13:15 “Though He slay me, I will hope in Him...” (NASB)

Suffering for spiritual service may be the most intense suffering endured in life. But as we shall see, it also produces the greatest Joy and Peace in, and blessing for, those who will trust in God despite the hurt. Our attitude while enduring suffering should

actually be one of rejoicing (believe it or not!), because God has such confidence in us, He considers us worthy of the honor of representing Him before a fallen world.

Acts 5:40-42 “... They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.” (NIV)

Matthew 5:11,12 “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me (*Jesus*). Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (NIV)

One of the great ironies of life is: God seems to reserve the most difficult trials for the children who love Him most, because He knows they can handle them, and in so doing, glorify Him, know the greatest Joy and Peace a human being can know in this life, and bring unquenchable light to a fallen world. And as we shall see, the blessings God has in store for those who will trust Him through suffering are indescribable. More on this later.

2 Corinthians 6:1-10 “... we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain... giving no cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry will not be discredited, but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger, in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love, in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left, by glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; regarded as deceivers and yet true; as unknown yet well-known, as dying yet behold, we live; as punished yet not put to death, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 8:1-4 “And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people.” (NIV)

Luke 6:35 “But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men.” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 2:9 “but just as it is written, ‘THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.’ ” (NASB)

A quick look at Job.

We've seen four general reasons for human suffering that provide a simple framework to help us understand the role of suffering in a fallen world. But as we all know, real life is not necessarily simple, and many times it's pretty darn complicated.

This is certainly true when it comes to understanding human suffering. The reasons we suffer can overlap and change as our attitudes and behavior change. When we choose to learn from our mistakes, what begins as suffering for our own bad decisions can become a spiritual test that allows us to grow. Discipline from God can suddenly disappear when we ask for forgiveness for our sins, or it can continue as a means through which we are somehow able to serve God.

Sometimes, there seems no correlation between our behavior and our circumstances. We can be committing terrible sins and experiencing a trouble free life, when God gives us time to repent on our own before He disciplines us. On the other hand, we can be living lives of great holiness and have adversity strike us like a thunderbolt, when God allows suffering as a means of spiritual service. And so when it comes to understanding the role of suffering in our lives, it's definitely easy to get confused and discouraged.

In trying to make sense of it all, it's helpful to look at the fascinating story of Job found in the Old Testament. Job is one of the "poetic" books of the Bible, where (other than in the prologue and epilogue) the story is told in poetry. The entire book is a meditation on suffering, and some scholars believe it is the oldest book in the Bible. It is certainly an ancient text, which reveals that the subject of human suffering has been around long before us, mystifying the human race from the beginning.

In the first two chapters of Job, we get an introduction to the story. Job is the greatest man of his generation. God says, "there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil." (That's pretty high praise!) As a result, God blessed Job with health, wealth, and family. But the fallen angel Satan challenges God, and basically says that the only reason Job serves God is because of all the blessings God has bestowed upon him. To prove Satan wrong, God allows Job to be tested, and in a matter of just a few terrible moments, Job loses all of his children and all of his wealth. What was Job's response?

Job 1:6-22 "Now there was a day when the sons of God (*angels*) came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. The Lord said to Satan, 'From where do you come?' Then Satan answered the Lord and said, 'From roaming about on the earth and walking around on it.' The Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil.' Then Satan answered the Lord, 'Does Job fear God for nothing?'

Have You not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth Your hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse You to Your face.’ Then the Lord said to Satan, ‘Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not put forth your hand on him.’ So Satan departed from the presence of the Lord. Now on the day when his sons and his daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother’s house, a messenger came to Job and said... *(Job lost the lives of all his children and all his wealth in a matter of just a few moments.)* Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped. He said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD.’ Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God.” (NASB)

Incredible! When God points out to Satan that Job has remained faithful, Satan counters, “Skin for skin!... put forth Your hand, now, and touch his bone and his flesh; he will curse You to Your face.” So God allows Satan to afflict Job’s body. Job was covered from head to toe with excruciatingly painful boils, with his only company a foolish wife, whose counsel was to, “Curse God and die!” What was Job’s response?

Job 2:1-13 “Again there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD. The LORD said to Satan, ‘Where have you come from?’ Then Satan answered the LORD and said, ‘From roaming about on the earth and walking around on it.’ The LORD said to Satan, ‘Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man fearing God and turning away from evil. And he still holds fast his integrity, although you incited Me against him to ruin him without cause.’ Satan answered the LORD and said, ‘Skin for skin! Yes, all that a man has he will give for his life. However, put forth Your hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh; he will curse You to Your face.’ So the LORD said to Satan, ‘Behold, he is in your power, only spare his life.’ Then Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. And he took a potsherd to scrape himself while he was sitting among the ashes. Then his wife said to him, ‘Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die!’ But he said to her, ‘You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?’ In all this Job did not sin with his lips. Now when Job’s three friends heard of all this adversity that had come upon him, they came each one from his own place, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite; and they made an appointment together to come to sympathize with him and comfort him. When they lifted up their eyes at a distance and did not recognize him, they raised their voices and wept. And each of them tore his robe and they threw dust over their heads toward the sky. Then they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven

nights with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great.” (NASB)

Again, incredible! In all this, Job did not sin... until his three friends show up. In chapters 3 through 37 of Job, we hear the counsel of Job’s friends, who go on and on about life and the nature of suffering, and while many of the observations they describe are absolutely correct, most of the conclusions they reach are absolutely wrong. And eventually, Job begins to feel sorry for himself, question God’s love, and finally he sins.

In chapters 38 through 42, God shows up, and His response is very interesting. He doesn’t explain to Job what’s going on. God doesn’t sit down next to Job, put a sympathetic arm around his shoulder and say, “Listen Job, I’m really sorry about all this. You see Satan came around and said you only trusted Me because of all your blessings, so I let him take them all away to prove him wrong, and eventually all this is going to be recorded in a book that people will learn from for thousands of years, and it’s all going to be worth it...” That was not God’s response at all. Here is a little bit of what God said...

Job 38:1 through 42:14 “Then the LORD spoke to Job out of the storm. He said: ‘Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone – while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy? Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness, when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place, when I said, “This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt?” Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place... Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been shown to you? Have you seen the gates of the deepest darkness? Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth? Tell me, if you know all this. What is the way to the abode of light? And where does darkness reside? Can you take them to their places? Do you know the paths to their dwellings? Surely you know, for you were already born! You have lived so many years! Have you entered the storehouses of the snow or seen the storehouses of the hail, which I reserve for times of trouble, for days of war and battle? What is the way to the place where the lightning is dispersed, or the place where the east winds are scattered over the earth? Who cuts a channel for the torrents of rain, and a path for the thunderstorm, to water a land where no one lives, an uninhabited desert, to satisfy a desolate wasteland and make it sprout with grass? Does the rain have a father? Who fathers the drops of dew? From whose womb comes the ice? Who gives birth to the frost from the heavens when the waters become hard as stone, when the

surface of the deep is frozen? Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades? Can you loosen Orion's belt? Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons or lead out the Bear with its cubs? Do you know the laws of the heavens? Can you set up God's dominion over the earth?... Do you give the horse its strength or clothe its neck with a flowing mane? Do you make it leap like a locust, striking terror with its proud snorting? It paws fiercely, rejoicing in its strength, and charges into the fray. It laughs at fear, afraid of nothing; it does not shy away from the sword. The quiver rattles against its side, along with the flashing spear and lance. In frenzied excitement it eats up the ground; it cannot stand still when the trumpet sounds. At the blast of the trumpet it snorts, "Aha!" It catches the scent of battle from afar, the shout of commanders and the battle cry... The LORD said to Job: 'Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!' Then Job answered the LORD: 'I am unworthy – how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer – twice, but I will say no more.' Then the LORD spoke to Job out of the storm: 'Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself? Do you have an arm like God's, and can your voice thunder like his? Then adorn yourself with glory and splendor, and clothe yourself in honor and majesty. Unleash the fury of your wrath, look at all who are proud and bring them low, look at all who are proud and humble them, crush the wicked where they stand. Bury them all in the dust together; shroud their faces in the grave. Then I myself will admit to you that your own right hand can save you.' " (NIV)

God is pretty tough on Job. He doesn't offer any explanation whatsoever for why Job is suffering. Instead, God calls upon Job to remember who God is. God is holy and God is love. Period. And that, at the end of the day, is all Job really needs to know. Why? Because what God's holiness and love translate to in the language of human suffering is an eternal, unbreakable promise that *God would not allow us to suffer unless there was a good reason*. God says: Trust Me and I will provide.

Job does and God does! Job repents, God forgives, and then God blesses Job beyond his wildest dreams.

Job 42:1-17 "Then Job replied to the Lord: 'I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted. You asked, "Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?" Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. You said, "Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me." My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.' After the LORD had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, 'I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has. So now take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and sacrifice a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his

prayer and not deal with you according to your folly. You have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has.’ So Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite did what the LORD told them; and the LORD accepted Job’s prayer. After Job had prayed for his friends, the LORD restored his fortunes and gave him twice as much as he had before. All his brothers and sisters and everyone who had known him before came and ate with him in his house. They comforted and consoled him over all the trouble the LORD had brought on him, and each one gave him a piece of silver and a gold ring. The LORD blessed the latter part of Job’s life more than the former part. He had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen and a thousand donkeys. And he also had seven sons and three daughters. The first daughter he named Jemimah (*meaning “dove”*), the second Keziah (*“cinnamon”*) and the third Keren-Happuch (*“container of antimony,” a highly prized eye shadow*). Nowhere in all the land were there found women as beautiful as Job’s daughters, and their father granted them an inheritance along with their brothers. After this, Job lived a hundred and forty years; he saw his children and their children to the fourth generation. And so Job died, an old man and full of years (*an idiom for extremely happy and content*).” (NIV)

There are many principles we can take away from just this brief look at Job. Through Job’s faithfulness, God demonstrates that it is neither our environment (in Job’s case, his wealth and family, the first things taken from Job) nor our physical abilities (Job’s health, the second thing taken from Job) that determine who we are. Our *choices* determine who we are. Job chose to trust God when he was blessed with health, wealth, and family, and he also chose to trust God when he was cursed with sickness, poverty, and isolation, losing everything he had and everything he was. In the same way, we cannot ultimately claim who we are is the result of what we have or how God made us. We are ultimately the product of neither our environment nor our chromosomes. We are ultimately the product of the decisions we freely choose to make.

Notice while God does not necessarily cause suffering in our lives, there are times when He undeniably allows it. God did not take Job’s blessings away from him, but He allowed Satan to do so. We therefore must learn to trust that when troubles come, God is allowing it to happen *for a reason*. And we must trust that the reason is good.

God did not explain to Job the reason for his sufferings. He simply challenged Job to trust Him. It’s the same way with us. There will be many times in life when we will know exactly why we are suffering. But there will also be many times when we will have no clue. We are called to trust God no matter what with the humility of Job.

1 Peter 4:19 “Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

Habakkuk 3:17-19 “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there

are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength..." (NIV)

Notice God does not squash us like bugs when we fail a test. It's pretty clear that at the beginning of the story Job was suffering for spiritual service. He wasn't sinning, so he wasn't suffering for his own bad decisions or as a result of God's discipline. And he had already matured, so he wasn't suffering as part of a spiritual test in order to grow. His suffering was a service to God.

And Job did great until his friends showed up and led him astray. Then Job failed, and the focus of his suffering shifted from spiritual service to spiritual testing. Would Job give up or return to God? Would he be defeated in the end, or despite a momentary lapse, lift his eyes up to the Lord and trust Him?

Job chose to return to God, and God forgave Job's failure and blessed him twice as much as He had before. *There are some very important principles here!* We are called to holiness, but not condemned for failure. We are to strive for perfection, but perfection is not required from us. For all of God's seemingly harsh words to Job, look at God's actions. The minute Job repented, God swooped in, forgave all, and not only restored Job, but *doubled* his blessing. God did not hold Job's failure against him for the rest of his life. God forgave. God forgot. And God rewarded.

Psalm 73:21-26 "When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." (NIV)

Psalm 103:8-18 "The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love... he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children – with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts." (NIV)

Micah 7:18,19 "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression... You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea." (NIV)

A mysterious equation, with only one response (trusting in God's good purpose).

In the equation of human suffering, one plus one does not necessarily equal two. A good life does not always mean an easy life. A failure (even a serious one) does not automatically incur the everlasting wrath of God. The cause and effect of human suffering are mysterious, but a paralleling truth we must always remember for our comfort is: *Our suffering is never arbitrary.* God *always* has a purpose, even when the purpose is not revealed, and His purpose is *always* good.

There will be times in our lives when we will suffer, and it will be our own fault. There will also be times when we deserve to suffer, but God will be merciful. And there will be times when we will suffer for absolutely no fault of our own. Sometimes we'll know why. Sometimes we won't. But because we have God's promise that He only allows suffering when it is a part of His good purpose, we can be encouraged and always know how to respond, regardless of the circumstances: With trust in our holy, loving Heavenly Father.

Isaiah 50:10 “... Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on their God.” (NIV)

Walking in darkness – Faith in the absence of answers (part 1).

Many times God calls His children to “walk in the dark,” that is; to endure without understanding the reasons for suffering. Why would God do this? One reason is that *it helps us discover any contingencies to our faith.* In the absence of answers, where there is only suffering and the One who allows it, everything else is stripped away. Nothing remains except the fundamental question of whether we truly trust God. If reasons for suffering are introduced, the waters turn murky and everything becomes relative. We might trust God if suffering is for a certain reason but not for another reason. Our faith becomes qualified by our perceived acceptability of one purpose over another.

God saves a lot of time and gets right to the heart of the matter when He plunges us into the darkness and commands us to walk, without any explanation or elaboration. The “rubber hits the road” and through our choices we find out who we truly are – a person who genuinely trusts God, or a person whose trust in Him is contingent upon whether the justification for suffering seems satisfactory.

Another reason is that when we choose to trust God in the absence of any apparent justification or explanation for suffering, *the light we bring to the world and the glory we bring to God are amplified.* It's easier to trust when we have all the answers, and more difficult when we don't. But the difficulty is also what makes others stand up and take note of our faith, as they wonder how we can trust God in such darkness, and

this greatly increases the spiritual wattage that generates the light we bring to the world and the glory we bring to God.

When we trust God during these terribly difficult circumstances, we become a clear and compelling light in the darkness. The shadowy road we walk becomes brightly illuminated by our faithfulness, and this glorifies God and lights the way for others to discover Him. Those lost in the darkness are drawn to the light of faith, where they can meet the One who gave them life and who has a purpose for their being. *We never glorify God more, or serve Him more effectively, than when we walk with Him in the darkness.*

Micah 7:7,8 “But as for me, I will watch expectantly for the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me. Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy. Though I fall I will rise; though I dwell in darkness, the LORD is a light for me.” (NASB)

Ephesians 5:2-20 “... walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God... For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord... Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil... speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 4:1-16 “... we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God... For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body... Therefore we do not lose heart...” (NIV)

Matthew 5:14-16 “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” (NASB)

Psalm 89:15-17 “Blessed are those who have learned to... walk in the light of your presence, LORD. They rejoice in your name all day long; they celebrate your righteousness. For you are their glory and strength...” (NIV)

Isaiah 42:5,6 “This is what God the LORD says – the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: ‘I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you... a light...’ ” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 10:31 “... whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” (NIV)

Jude 1:24,25 “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.” (NASB)

The type of faith we are talking about here is not “blind” faith; that is, an unjustifiable or indefensible faith. Our faith is fully and completely justified by God’s truthful and unbreakable promise that there is a good purpose behind every heartache, even when we don’t know what that purpose is. We may be blind to the purpose, but we are not blind to the One who assures us He would never let us suffer unless He had a good reason. On the contrary, our eyes are perfectly fixed and focused on Him, and in our relationship with Him we find everything we need to walk in the darkness of the fallen world with Joy and Peace.

Hebrews 12:1-14 “... let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart... Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.” (NIV)

James 1:2-12 “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing... Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.” (NASB)

It can be very difficult to reach a place where our hearts are truly comforted despite the harsh realities of suffering in a fallen world, especially if you have experienced genuine hardship in your own life or in the life of someone you love. The themes that illuminate the darkness are in some ways simple, but not necessarily easy, and it can take time to appreciate them. And so we will develop all of these principles in more detail as we continue along in our study, with hopes of finding the comfort we all seek from the suffering inherent in a fallen world.

2 Corinthians 1:3-5 “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Isaiah 57:15-18 “For this is what the high and exalted One says – he who lives forever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite... I will heal them; I will guide them and restore comfort...’ ” (NIV)

Inevitable suffering... and inevitable blessing.

As we discover our destiny, we will inevitably encounter suffering. That is a cold, hard reality of life in a fallen world our truthful Heavenly Father shares with us for our caution. Understanding this helps us make sense of a senseless world. We know what to expect. There should be no surprises.

But God wants us to know not only what to expect from the *world*, but also what to expect from *Him*. We’re not set adrift in the world with only the certainty of how it will mistreat those who follow Jesus. We are also the beneficiaries of a second, thrilling certainty that provides us with a hope that transcends the injustice and sadness of the world.

AS WE FULFILL OUR DESTINY, WE WILL INEVITABLY EXPERIENCE JOY AND PEACE.

An unbreakable promise.

We are born into a world torn to shreds by the abuse of the mighty gift of freewill, but the overwhelmingly good news is: That does not for one moment interfere with almighty God’s infinite ability or endless desire to fill His children to overflowing with Joy “inexpressible” and Peace “surpassing comprehension.”

When we follow Jesus, we discover our destiny. When we discover our destiny, we inevitably encounter suffering. But if we will choose to persevere and fulfill our destiny – despite the suffering – we will inevitably experience what it is that every human heart ultimately longs for in a fallen world: Joy and Peace. This is God’s unbreakable promise to you, and the subject of our final chapter.

Psalm 16:11 “You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.” (NIV)

Psalm 89:15-17 “Blessed are those who have learned to... walk in the light of your presence, LORD. They rejoice in your name all day long; they celebrate your righteousness. For you are their glory and strength...” (NIV)

Hebrews 10:22-36 “let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings... Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful... Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.” (NIV)

1 Peter 5:6,7 “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.” (NIV)

Romans 15:13 “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (NIV)

Chapter 7

KNOWING JOY AND PEACE IN A FALLEN WORLD

(EXPERIENCING OUR DESTINY)

GOD'S ULTIMATE DESIRE FOR YOU WITHIN A FALLEN WORLD IS: A LIFE OVERFLOWING WITH JOY "INEXPRESSIBLE" AND PEACE "SURPASSING COMPREHENSION."

The results of following Jesus.

When we choose to put our faith in Jesus, trusting in Him for our eternal salvation, and then choose to follow Him throughout the course of our lives, we fulfill our destiny. We discover and accomplish the plan and purpose God had in mind when He chose to create us. In a sense, this is the *outward* result of heeding the call of God, what we do for Him within the confines of a fallen world. It is the *fulfillment* of our being, which God destined from eternity past.

As we follow Jesus, we also come to know Joy and Peace. We are filled to overflowing with a passion and contentment that is perhaps God's greatest desire for the children He loves. We can think of this as the *inward* result of heeding the call of God, what God does for us within the confines of the human heart. It is the *experience* of our being, which God destined from eternity past.

The voice of God calls to us. By His grace, we follow His leading and fulfill His plan. In so doing, we experience what the Bible describes as Joy "inexpressible" and Peace "surpassing comprehension," a state of being wherein the course of our lives becomes a music composed by God and played out in the world through our every thought, word, and deed. This is the ultimate will of God for you, what God promises you will experience as you walk with Him through both the wonderful and the heartbreaking circumstances of life.

So just what exactly are we talking about here anyway...

WHAT JOY AND PEACE ARE.

Passion and Contentment.

Joy is enthusiasm for life. It's waking up in the morning and being glad you're alive. It's the spark in your eyes, and the spring in your step. It's living life with passion.

1 Peter 1:8 “and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory,” (NASB)

Isaiah 60:1-9 “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you... Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy... to the honor of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor.” (NIV)

Jeremiah 15:16 “... Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart...” (NASB)

Jude 1:24,25 “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.” (NASB)

Peace is satisfaction with life. It's going to bed at night and feeling secure, no matter what the day has brought. It's the depth of your eyes, and the firmness of your step. It's living life with contentment.

Philippians 4:6,7 “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (NASB)

Psalms 119:165 “Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 14:33 “for God is not a God of confusion but of peace...” (NASB)

Romans 2:9-11 “There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil... but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good... For there is no partiality with God.” (NASB)

This Joy “inexpressible” and Peace “surpassing comprehension” is created within us by the Spirit of God when we choose to put our faith in Jesus and then follow Him.

Romans 15:13 “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (NIV)

Two Fruits of the Spirit.

Joy and Peace are two of the fruits of the Spirit described in Galatians 5:22 that we first considered in Chapter 5. When we allow the Spirit of God to guide and empower us, our lives bear fruit. The first fruit is the love of Christ. We begin to love God and one another the way Jesus loved God and others.

Galatians 5:22,23 “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control...” (NASB)

This love opens the door to the rest of the fruit of the Spirit. We’ve already looked at patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are the fruits we described as the *outward expressions* of love for God and mankind. Joy and Peace are the *inward results* of Jesus’ love within us. The love of Christ creates Joy and Peace within our hearts, and we express this Joy and Peace by being patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled.

The nature of Joy.

The Greek word used for “joy” in Galatians 5:22 is *chara*. It refers to a mental state of enthusiasm or excitement. We study God’s Word. God’s Spirit makes it real to us. We accept it as true and choose to live by it. We begin to trust God with our lives and treat others with kindness and integrity through the power God’s Spirit provides.

As we do all this, a passion for life begins to form in our hearts. We gain control over ourselves and the way we respond to our circumstances. And an enthusiasm for life grows as we grow into spiritual maturity. Finally we come to a point where we know this Joy regardless of our circumstances. We find our Joy solely in our relationship with the Lord, and express it in the way we treat other people.

Jeremiah 15:16 “... Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart...” (NASB)

Isaiah 42:10,11 “Sing to the LORD a new song... Let the people... sing for joy; let them shout from the mountaintops.” (NIV)

Isaiah 58:14 “... find your joy in the LORD...” (NIV)

When knowing this Joy becomes the focus of our lives, the Spirit of God is able to strengthen and empower us. Jesus Christ found the strength to bear the ultimate in suffering on the cross by looking forward to the “joy set before Him” by God the Father. Our Savior was able to look beyond the temporary suffering He would have to endure (even though it would be the most unspeakable in all of human history) and keep His eyes on the Joy obedience to the Father would ultimately bring. Now the suffering is over and Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father in incomparable glory.

Hebrews 12:1-14 “... let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart... Make every effort to

live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.” (NIV)

As God’s children we learn to trust the Heavenly Father we love, and because we love Him, we obey His command to love one another. We share the Gospel, encourage fellow Christians, and help those in need. We treat others with patience and kindness, even when they do not deserve it. This is how God behaves toward us, and how we as God’s children are commanded to behave toward others. Then as we behave as the children of God, the Joy of God begins to flow into our hearts.

John 14:15 “I you love Me (*Jesus*), you will keep My commandments.” (NASB)

John 15:12 “This is My (*Jesus*)’ commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.” (NASB)

Ephesians 5:1-21 “Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved... among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people... Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord... Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity... be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (NIV)

Luke 6:35,36 “But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (NASB)

Colossians 1:9-12 “... be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.” (NASB)

The nature of Peace.

The Greek word used for peace in Galatians 5:22 is *eirene*, which is the equivalent of the Hebrew word *shalom*. These words are extraordinarily rich, and they have a variety of meanings. The roots of the words refer to an “absence of conflict” that leads to a rich, prosperous life. In order for a nation or an individual to prosper, there must be peace. It is a peaceful environment free of conflict that allows a people to thrive. Peace and prosperity are so closely related, *shalom* is sometimes translated “prosperity,” depending on how it is used in the sentence.

Numbers 6:22-26 “Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying, ‘Thus you shall bless the sons of Israel. You shall say to them: The LORD bless you, and keep you; the LORD make His face shine on you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up His countenance on you, and give you peace (*shalom*).’ ” (NASB)

Psalm 37:11 “... the humble will... delight themselves in abundant prosperity (*shalom*).” (NASB)

1 Peter 1:2 “... May grace and peace (*eirene*) be yours in fullest measure.” (NASB)

Romans 1:7 “... Grace and peace (*eirene*) to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.” (NIV)

Job 22:21 “Submit to God and be at peace (*shalom*) with him; in this way prosperity will come to you.” (NIV)

But these words also refer to contentment in *any* circumstance; that is, prosperity or adversity. If you have the fruit of the Spirit of Peace, you are happy and content no matter what this life may bring. You work very hard to be successful in all your endeavors. You do your best (“best” is meant as a challenge, not a cop out) to be successful. Then you truly appreciate and enjoy the good things you have, and you trust God with the rest. You don’t agonize about the things you don’t have. You experience the Joy and Peace God intends for you.

Philippians 4:11-20 “I (*Paul*) have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me... And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen.” (NASB)

Hebrews 13:1-5 “Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters... Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have...” (NIV)

Proverbs 17:1 “Better a dry crust with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting, with strife.” (NIV)

2 Thessalonians 3:16 “Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance. The Lord be with you all!” (NASB)

Most of us will experience times of both prosperity and adversity. Life simply has its ups and downs, wonderful “mountain top experiences,” and difficult “times in the valley.” When we learn to love the way Jesus loved, trusting God and having compassion for our fellow mankind, the Spirit of God grants us Joy and Peace regardless of whether we are on the mountain top or in the valley. We will be happy and content, regardless of our circumstances, because our Joy and Peace are not centered around the *things* of this fragile world, but rather around an unbreakable *relationship* with a person – Jesus Christ.

Romans 8:6 “... the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace,” (NASB)

Psalm 23:4 “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me...” (NASB)

Habakkuk 3:17-19 “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength...” (NIV)

Psalm 128:1,2 “How blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in His ways. When you shall eat of the fruit of your hands, you will be happy and it will be well with you.” (NASB)

Psalm 104:34 “... as for me, I shall be glad in the LORD.” (NASB)

True Happiness.

Joy and Peace together form true happiness, the thing we all long for in a fallen world. Joy is the more emotive part of happiness – the spark, spring, and passion. Peace is the more non-emotive part of happiness – the depth, firmness, and contentment. Joy is the fire. Peace is the rock. Together, they are both unstoppable and unmovable. Joy cannot be quenched. Peace cannot be displaced.

Psalm 30:4,5 “Sing praise to the LORD, you His godly ones, and give thanks to His holy name... Weeping may last for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning.” (NASB)

Isaiah 26:3,4 “The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect peace, because he trusts in You. Trust in the LORD forever, for in GOD the LORD, we have an everlasting Rock.” (NASB)

And they cannot be separated. We cannot be joyfully anxious, nor can we be joylessly content. True Joy and true Peace are inseparable. They visit us together, or not at all, as two sides of the same coin, the coin of true happiness.

Proverbs 3:13-18 “How blessed is the man who finds wisdom and the man who gains understanding. For her profit is better than the profit of silver and her gain better than fine gold. She is more precious than jewels; and nothing you desire compares with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are pleasant ways and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her, and happy are all who hold her fast.” (NASB)

Proverbs 12:20 “Deceit is in the heart of those who devise evil, but counselors of peace have joy.” (NASB)

What Jesus came to bring.

Along with our eternal salvation, Joy and Peace are what Jesus came to earth to bring. It's the balm He brought to heal the wounds of a fallen world. And it is what He left behind to sustain us until we are called to our eternal home. Jesus, infinitely more

than any other being in all of human history, knew true Joy and true Peace – even in the face of more injustice and brutality than any human in all of history has ever had to endure – and they are the gifts He offers to any who will hear His words and follow His path.

Consider the words of Jesus (from the book of John, chapters 13 through 17), spoken to His beloved disciples at the Last Supper, the night before Jesus was arrested, falsely condemned to death, mocked, brutally beaten, scourged with a Roman whip, spat upon, crowned with thorns, and crucified on Calvary for you and me. The common themes running throughout Jesus’ final “heart-to-heart” with His dearest friends were: Joy and Peace.

John 13:1,2 “It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The evening meal was in progress...” (NIV)

John 14:1-27 “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me... Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” (NIV)

John 15:9-12 “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” (NIV)

John 16:5-33 “But now I am going to Him who sent Me... But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper (*God’s Spirit*) will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you... I came forth from the Father and have come into the world; I am leaving the world again and going to the Father... These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.” (NASB)

John 17:1-26 “After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: ‘Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you... I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one... Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.’ ” (NIV)

This then, briefly, is what Joy and Peace are.

WHAT JOY AND PEACE ARE NOT.

Cheap perfumes in a Vegas nightclub.

The world has its own versions of what Joy and Peace are, and they are very different from the real thing. Twisted concepts of happiness permeate the world we live in, like cheap perfumes in a Vegas nightclub. But just as a bargain fragrance cannot compare to the breeze drifting through a forest full of pine, these cheap substitutes cannot compare to the true Joy and true Peace God intends for you and me.

There are many of these forgeries we could consider. Here are just a few of them.

Emotion.

Joy is not running down the street with your hands in the air cackling like a chicken. It's not an emotional high that hits you like a shot of tequila and then leaves you just as quickly with a hangover. Joy is a passion for life that characterizes how we deal with every circumstance, both good and bad. It's with you during your triumphs, and it's with you during your tears. It's a faithful companion that stands by your side through thick and thin. As strange as it may seem, God's grace allows us to know Joy (and of course Peace) even in our darkest hour.

2 Corinthians 6:1-10 "... we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain... but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses... in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love, in the word of truth, in the power of God... as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things." (NASB)

2 Corinthians 7:4 "... in all our troubles my (*Paul's*) joy knows no bounds." (NIV)

Acts 5:40-42 "... They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah." (NIV)

While there is certainly an emotive quality to Joy, it is not the emotion itself. Joy is a foundation upon which genuine emotion can be expressed. We make good decisions, and we know Joy. We know Joy, and we express Joy through various emotions.

Emotions are tricky things. They can be wonderful or debilitating, all depending on whether we make good decisions or bad decisions. Emotions are emphatically not the basis upon which to *make* decisions. Indeed they can be extraordinarily

treacherous guides in making choices. However (with the exception of those who have illnesses affecting their emotional state), emotions are a fairly good barometer of the types of choices we are making. Healthy emotions for healthy decisions. Unhealthy emotions for unhealthy decisions.

In a sense, people don't really have emotional breakdowns. That's part of what emotions are designed to do – break us down when we go astray. God gave us emotions so we can:

- ❖ Enjoy the good decisions we make in the light of God's Word and through the guidance His Spirit; and
- ❖ Beware of the bad decisions we make as a result of pride and arrogance.

God also gave us emotions as a way to express legitimate grief. These emotions are important, and part of the process by which our hearts heal. They are a beautiful part of what it is to be human, and Jesus felt them deeply.

John 11:1-36 “Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) So the sisters sent word to Jesus, ‘Lord, the one you love is sick’... Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus... On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days... When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ‘Where have you laid him?’ he asked. ‘Come and see, Lord,’ they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’ ” (NIV)

Indifference.

Peace is not sitting in a corner like a zombie during times of trial, with eyes rolled back in our heads and brain waves as flat as a pancake. Nor is it a flippant, “what the hell” kind of attitude. It is not apathy, complacency, stoicism, or denial. It is not gritting your teeth and “taking it like a man.” It is not pouty martyrdom. In fact, one way to describe Peace is: The ability to know Joy during both times of great blessing and intense suffering. Peace, like Joy, is a faithful companion who walks by your side down every conceivable path worn across the face of heaven and earth.

James 1:2-12 “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him...

Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.” (NASB)

Psalm 89:15-17 “Blessed are those who have learned to... walk in the light of your presence, LORD. They rejoice in your name all day long; they celebrate your righteousness. For you are their glory and strength...” (NIV)

Psalm 119:165 “Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.” (NIV)

Those who know Peace still care. There is a sense of involvement in the world and a connection with those around us. Sometimes the world tells us: “Don’t care. Don’t get involved. It’s not our business. We can’t change the world, so just accept it.” But indifference is not Peace. Those at Peace still feel an eagerness to play a part in the drama of life.

Titus 2:13,14 “Jesus... gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.” (NIV)

2 Timothy 1:6,7 “... fan into flame the gift of God... For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 9:2-6 “For I (*Paul*) know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians... and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action... Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.” (NIV)

And the drama of life sometimes hurts. Being at Peace does not mean being without feelings. Peace is the ability to feel deeply both exhilaration and hurt, without being carried away by either of them in an unhealthy way. Peace transcends the emotional highs and lows of blessing and injury, and brings stability, security, and an abiding contentment.

Isaiah 26:3,4 “The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect peace, because he trusts in You. Trust in the LORD forever, for in GOD the LORD, we have an everlasting Rock.” (NASB)

Jesus is our example. The week before He died, He was welcomed into the city of Jerusalem by people who thought He might be the Messiah. The entire city turned out with palm branches (an ancient symbol of honor), and opened the city to Him with thunderous cries of welcome. Just a few days later, the night before He died, He was in such distress at His impending sacrificial death on the cross He was literally near death from the burden. Through it all – tremendous highs and tremendous lows – He knew true Peace.

John 12:12-28 “The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the

Lord! Blessed is the king of Israel!... Jesus replied, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds... Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? "Father, save me from this hour?" No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!' " (NIV)

Matthew 26:36-56 "Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.' He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.' Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.' Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping... He went away a second time and prayed, 'My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.' When he came back, he again found them sleeping... So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing... Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him... In that hour Jesus said to the crowd, '... this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled.' Then all the disciples deserted him and fled." (NIV)

Luke 22:44 "And being in anguish, he (*Jesus*) prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground." (NIV)

Ease.

Luxury does not equal Joy or Peace. Nearly everyone fanaticizes about what it would be like to have lots of money, to never have to work again, and to be able to treat ourselves all day long to whatever indulgence suits our fancy. While there is nothing wrong with financial prosperity and enjoying the good things God has provided, a simple truth is that money cannot buy happiness. If it could, then all rich people would be happy, and our common experience demonstrates this is not true.

Matthew 6:19-21 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (NIV)

2 Timothy 3:2-7 "For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant... holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; avoid such men as these. For among them are those who enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth." (NASB)

Ephesians 4:18,19 "They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to

sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Hebrews 13:5,6 “Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, ‘I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER FORSAKE YOU,’ so that we confidently say, ‘THE LORD IS MY HELPER, I WILL NOT BE AFRAID. WHAT WILL MAN DO TO ME?’ ” (NASB)

1 Timothy 6:7-19 “For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it... Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs... pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith... Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.” (NIV)

An easy life does not necessarily translate into a fulfilling life, and many times ease only leads to weakness, apathy, and disillusionment. Children who never know times of testing and struggle sometimes never grow into strong, capable adults. If we spend all of our time on the couch, eating ice cream and never attempting anything difficult, we end up fat, lazy, and bored... and ultimately desperate. It’s the same way with our spirits.

Proverbs 30:7-9 “Two things I ask of you, LORD; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ ” (NIV)

Hebrews 6:12 “We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.” (NIV)

Proverbs 10:4 “Lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth.” (NIV)

As we saw earlier, God uses the suffering that is inevitable in a fallen world as a tool to test and thereby strengthen His children, so we mature from spiritual infancy to spiritual adulthood. While many of us will experience times of prosperity and ease during our lives, *everyone* will experience times of trial as we learn the lessons God has prepared for His children. But the wonderful thing is, through God’s grace we can know Joy and Peace during both good times and bad, which brings glory to the Father and light to the world.

Mark 10:29,30 “ ‘Truly I tell you,’ Jesus replied, ‘no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers,

sisters, mothers, children and fields – along with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life.’ ” (NIV)

Job 2:10 “... Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?...” (NASB)

Proverbs 17:3 “The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tests hearts.” (NASB)

1 Thessalonians 1:6,7 “You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.” (NASB)

Isaiah 42:5,6 “This is what God the LORD says – the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: ‘I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you... a light...’ ” (NIV)

Winning.

Knowing Joy and Peace is not getting what we want. It’s so common to think: “If I get this job, I’ll be happy. If I marry this person, I’ll be happy. If I buy this house, make this grade, have this child, earn this fame, retire to this island paradise...” This is emphatically not Joy and Peace.

Knowing Joy and Peace is living a passionate, contented life with *whatever* you have. It’s gratitude for what God has provided, and unconcern for what appears to be missing in the eyes of the world. Joy and Peace come from valuing the life to which God calls you, without envy for the life to which God calls another. It’s appreciating the blessings we have, and trusting God with the dreams that seem unfulfilled.

Psalm 37:16-18 “Better the little that the righteous have than the wealth of many wicked; for the power of the wicked will be broken, but the LORD upholds the righteous. The blameless spend their days under the LORD’s care, and their inheritance will endure forever.” (NIV)

Proverbs 15:16,17 “Better is a little with the fear of the LORD than great treasure and turmoil with it. Better is a dish of vegetables where love is than a fattened ox served with hatred.” (NASB)

Proverbs 3:13-26 “Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed... My son, do not let wisdom and understanding out of your sight, preserve sound judgment and discretion; they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck. Then you will go on your way in safety, and your foot will not stumble. When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will

be sweet. Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, for the LORD will be at your side and will keep your foot from being snared.” (NIV)

This does not at all mean we shouldn't strive for excellence. This is not a cop out or an excuse for laziness. On the contrary, we are called to be the most honest, hardworking people on the planet. Yet our success is not gauged by winning, but rather by the diligence of our efforts and the purity of our motives. We are responsible for hard work and good intentions. God is responsible for the results. More on this later.

James 3:13-18 “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such ‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.” (NIV)

Titus 2:7,8 “in all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, with purity in doctrine, dignified, sound in speech which is beyond reproach, so that the opponent will be put to shame, having nothing bad to say about us.” (NASB)

Matthew 5:14-16 “You are the light of the world... Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” (NASB)

Romans 14:17-19 “For the kingdom of God is... righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men. Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

1 Corinthians 4:5 “... the Lord... will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God.” (NASB)

Behind the veil.

Now we have a basic idea of what Joy and Peace are, and what Joy and Peace are not.

With this in mind, what is it, then, the world truly offers as its only alternative to Joy and Peace? What do we find when we strip away all the disguises and look behind the veil?

INSTEAD OF JOY AND PEACE (TRUE HAPPINESS), WHAT THE WORLD OFFERS AS ITS ONLY ALTERNATIVE IS: TEMPORARY DISTRACTION FROM UNHAPPINESS.

The greatest mistake anyone can ever make.

If we were to step way, way back, and try to take an objective look at the world we live in and single out the most foolish thing we all sometimes do while living here, it might be: *We chase after the things that will temporarily distract us from unhappiness, rather than the things that will create lasting happiness.*

This is perhaps the greatest mistake anyone can ever make. It wastes and then destroys lives. It takes all life should be, turns it inside out, and tramples the remains into the dust.

Ecclesiastes 2:1-20 “*I (Solomon, perhaps the most powerful and wealthy man who ever lived) said to myself, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.’ But that also proved to be meaningless... what does pleasure accomplish? I tried cheering myself with wine... I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards... I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well – the delights of a man’s heart... I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor... Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun. Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom... Then I said to myself... ‘What then do I gain by being wise?... This too is meaningless.’ So I hated life... All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for... So my heart began to despair...” (NIV)*

The dirty little secret.

Look into the heart of anyone who knows only success as the world defines it and you will find a dirty little secret: All their dreams have come true, and they are still empty and unsatisfied. The things of this world (like money, fame, power, promiscuous sex, drugs, alcohol, etc.) each have a very powerful effect – they can temporarily distract us from unhappiness. But they cannot make us happy, and there is a big difference!

Ecclesiastes 6:2 “God gives some people wealth, possessions and honor, so that they lack nothing their hearts desire, but God does not grant them the ability to enjoy them...” (NIV)

Ecclesiastes 5:19 “Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil – this is a gift of God... because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart.” (NIV)

Psalm 128:1,2 “How blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in His ways. When you shall eat of the fruit of your hands, you will be happy and it will be well with you.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 4:18 “... what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” (NIV)

The key word.

The key here word is: Temporarily. This distraction the world has to offer does not last, and when the newness of fame, fortune, or whatever wears off, it leaves us more desperate and alone than we were when we started. Then it takes a bigger dose to get the same distracting effect. The cavity in our soul steadily becomes deeper and wider, so it takes more stuff to try and fill it up.

Isaiah 9:18-20 “Surely wickedness burns like a fire... On the right they will devour, but still be hungry; on the left they will eat, but not be satisfied...” (NIV)

A terrible cycle then develops where our lives become about one thing, and one thing only: More. More money. More fame. More power. More sex. More drugs. More alcohol. Our spirits become addicted to distraction the way our bodies can become addicted to alcohol. At first, it only takes a couple of beers to get us drunk. Then it takes a six pack. Then a twelve pack. Then a fifth of scotch. Then our liver dies. Then we die.

Habakkuk 2:4-17 “See, the enemy is puffed up; his desires are not upright... he is arrogant and never at rest. Because he is as greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied... You will be filled with shame instead of glory... The violence you have done... will overwhelm you, and your destruction... will terrify you.” (NIV)

It starts out as a whirlwind of excitement, lifting us up and out of our discontent. But it ends up as a whirlpool of despair, sucking us down deeper and deeper into loneliness and fear, all in a desperate attempt to distract ourselves from the ultimate problem.

Deuteronomy 28:62-67 “... because you did not obey the LORD your God... the LORD will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life. In the morning you will say, ‘If only it were evening!’ and in the evening, ‘If only it were morning!’ – because of the terror that will fill your hearts...” (NIV)

The ultimate problem.

As human beings living on planet earth, our ultimate problem is this: Nothing on planet earth can make us happy. Everything the world has to offer at the end of the day amounts to nothing. When all is said and done, we receive from the world only emptiness in darkness, “sound and fury signifying nothing,” as Shakespeare so eloquently wrote.

Revelation 3:17 “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.” (NIV)

We feel this emptiness deeply. It’s part of the way we are created. Each of us knows a certain restlessness in this world, a sense that something is missing. And apart from God, this restlessness is insatiable and unstoppable. It builds as we journey through life, and what started out as an irritation deep down inside becomes more and more pronounced, along with the thundering knowledge that something desperately important is missing. So we go looking for it, and all too often we look in the wrong place – the world in which we live.

One day, if we are humble of heart, we come to the realization that if the things of this world cannot make us happy, then maybe we should look outside of the world, to the spiritual, rather than the material. And this leads us to God.

Then we have a choice. We can seek the things of God that will create lasting happiness, or we can stick with the things of the world that will only distract us from unhappiness, for a time – a brief and ultimately unsatisfying time.

If we seek God, we find Him, and the Joy and Peace for which we long. We gain an intimacy with the Creator of the Universe and find something that not only fills the empty place within us, but also does so to overflowing. We are complete. We are fulfilled. Instead of restless, we are restful.

2 Corinthians 1:3-5 “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Isaiah 57:15-18 “For this is what the high and exalted One says – he who lives forever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite... I will heal them; I will guide them and restore comfort...’ ” (NIV)

Psalms 23:1-6 “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. Even though I

walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.” (NASB)

Romans 15:13 “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (NIV)

If we seek the world, we find it, and the distraction that is its only gift. And we gain an intimacy with the base and degrading things of a fallen world. All the while, still empty. Still alone. Increasingly frustrated. From restless, to rabid.

Job 15:20-26 “... the wicked man suffers torment... Distress and anguish fill him with terror; troubles overwhelm him... because he shakes his fist at God and vaunts himself against the Almighty, defiantly charging against him...” (NIV)

Isaiah 57:20,21 “But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. ‘There is no peace,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked.’ ” (NIV)

Job 18:5,11 “The lamp of the wicked man is snuffed out... Terrors startle him on every side and dog his every step.” (NIV)

Then the distraction we so desperately cling to reveals its fatal flaw: It doesn’t last. It can’t last. It’s like filling up the void with dry ice – seems like pretty solid, powerful stuff at first, but ultimately it just melts away and doesn’t even leave a puddle, only a mist that disappears in the breeze.

Job 20:4-8 “Surely you know how it has been from of old, ever since mankind was placed on the earth, that the mirth of the wicked is brief, the joy of the godless lasts but a moment. Though the pride of the godless person reaches to the heavens and his head touches the clouds, he will perish forever, like his own dung; those who have seen him will say, ‘Where is he?’ Like a dream he flies away, no more to be found, banished like a vision of the night.” (NIV)

Psalms 37:1-11 “Do not fret because of evildoers, be not envious toward wrongdoers. For they will wither quickly like the grass and fade... Trust in the LORD and do good... Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He will do it. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light and your judgment as the noonday. Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him; do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, because of the man who carries out wicked schemes. Cease from anger and forsake wrath; do not fret; it leads only to evildoing. For evildoers will be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD, they will inherit the land. Yet a little while and the wicked man will be no more; and you will look carefully for his place and he will not be there. But the humble will inherit the land and will delight themselves in abundant prosperity.” (NASB)

Proverbs 11:7 “When a wicked man dies, his hope perishes; all he expected from his power comes to nothing.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

But it leaves a mark, an empty place burned deeper and wider by something that for all its appeal is destructive when not used for its intended purpose. There’s nothing fundamentally wrong with money, fame, or power, when they come from God as a part of His plan for your life. Nor is there anything wrong with a glass of wine with dinner or medically prescribed drugs. And sex within marriage is one of the greatest pleasures in life, designed by God for our delight. But *none* of these things were *ever* intended to be the *source* of happiness. They are to varying degrees the vehicles through which a pre-existing happiness may be *expressed*, but when we look to them to *provide* happiness, they morph from the blessings they were intended to be, to a curse by which we are maimed and finally euthanized.

1 John 2:15-17 “Do not love the world or anything in the world... For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Proverbs 5:21-23 “For the ways of a man are before the eyes of the LORD, and He watches all his paths. His own iniquities will capture the wicked, and he will be held with the cords of his sin... in the greatness of his folly he will go astray.” (NASB)

Psalms 14:4 “Will evildoers never learn... There they are, overwhelmed with dread...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Jeremiah 17:11 “Like a partridge that hatches eggs it did not lay are those who gain riches by unjust means. When their lives are half gone, their riches will desert them, and in the end they will prove to be fools.” (NIV)

Psalms 73:1-28 “Surely God is good to... those who are pure in heart! But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling... For I was envious of the arrogant as I saw the prosperity of the wicked... their body is fat. They are not in trouble as other men... pride is their necklace... They mock and wickedly speak of oppression... always at ease, they have increased in wealth... When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight until I came into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end. Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. How they are destroyed in a moment! They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors!... When my heart was embittered and I was pierced within, then I was senseless and ignorant. I was like a beast before You. Nevertheless I am continually with You; You have taken hold of my right hand. With Your counsel You will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. For, behold, those who are far from You will perish... But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all Your works.” (NASB)

The ultimate truth.

As human beings living on planet earth, our ultimate truth is this: Only a relationship with God can make us happy. True, lasting happiness – the Joy and Peace we all long for – does not come from things, but rather a Person. Happiness is a relationship between Heavenly Father and earthly child that is deep, real, and abiding. It's a friendship with the One who made the heavens and the earth and everything in them. Only our Creator can fill the void created in our hearts as part of our being. But when He does, He does not fill it half way or even to the top. He fills it to overflowing, until Joy “inexpressible” and Peace “surpassing comprehension” spill out, “like a spring whose waters never fail.”

Isaiah 58:11-14 “The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail... not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance...” (NIV)

Romans 8:19-39 “For the creation was subjected to frustration... in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved... And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose... What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NIV)

Psalms 31:14-20 “But I trust in you, LORD... my times are in your hands... How abundant are the good things that you have stored up for those who fear you... on those who take refuge in you. In the shelter of your presence... you keep them safe...” (NIV)

Psalms 37:4 “Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart.” (NASB)

John 10:10 “... I (*Jesus*) came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (NASB)

Psalms 62:1 “My soul finds rest in God alone...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

In the light of all the things we have seen so far in this study, we now need to get down to some of the most basic truths about ourselves, the One who created us, and the nature of our relationship with Him. This will help us understand how we can know Joy and Peace in a fallen world.

Ultimately, Joy and Peace are the *only* things we truly desire in this life. Ultimately, Joy and Peace are the *only* things God truly promises to give us in this life. And ultimately, whether we find Joy and Peace in this life is a *choice*.

ULTIMATELY, JOY AND PEACE ARE THE ONLY THINGS WE TRULY DESIRE IN THIS LIFE.

The “whatabouts.”

We’ve seen the emptiness of material things, like money, fame, power, promiscuous sex, alcohol, and drugs. They’re all dead ends. You might start out wanting them, but you end up loathing them. They become nothing to you, just leaden weights around your neck constantly reminding you something more important is missing. Desire for these things cannot last in a humble heart. They can only give way to a more powerful force – an unquenchable thirst to know our Creator.

But what about spiritual things? What about love? What about marriage and children? What about sharing Jesus with the world? And what about just plain fun and excitement, or laughter and friendship?

All of these are worthy things, but why do we want them? What is the purpose of having these *things*? What do we hope to gain from them? Isn’t it ultimately a *life*, a state of being full of passion and contentment? Isn’t it so we feel fulfilled, rather than empty? Isn’t this the Joy “inexpressible” and Peace “surpassing comprehension” we are exploring throughout this work?

Having vs. Being.

There is a big difference between having and being. You can have things, like a spouse, kids, or meaningful job, but so what? Lots of people have these things, but they sure aren’t happy.

On the other hand, there are people who don’t *have* any of these things, but instead they *are* something else: Happy. It is their *being* we admire and desire for ourselves. Ultimately, we want, not to possess what they have, but to be what they are – men and women who know Joy and Peace.

This is a different way of thinking. It's not "what do I want to have" but rather "how do I want to be?" How do I want to experience the time that has been granted to me? How shall I exist in this fallen world? Do I want to pursue *tangible things*, or do I want to pursue an *intangible life*, wherein I experience passion and contentment, enthusiasm and satisfaction – in other words, Joy and Peace.

Rainbows and Lightning Bolts.

True happiness is the proverbial "pot of gold at the end of the rainbow." We want to ride the rainbow so we can get to the gold. The things (like romance, marriage, kids, job, etc.) become the rainbow, and the life (knowing Joy and Peace) becomes the pot of gold at its end. And so we look for rainbows and try to follow them to their gilded end.

But the thing is, you don't need the rainbow to get to the gold. In fact, the rainbow doesn't even lead to the gold. The gold is with God, and to receive it you must simply walk with Him wherever He leads, whether it's strolling along the beautiful colors of the rainbow, or hotfooting it across the sizzling edge of a lightning bolt. The gold will then travel with you wherever you go, because it resides – not in some far off destination – but right there next to you in the presence of the One with whom you travel.

Psalm 73:25-28 "... besides You, I desire nothing on earth... God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever... as for me, the nearness of God is my good..." (NASB)

Psalm 16:11 "You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand." (NIV)

Psalm 89:15-17 "Blessed are those who have learned to... walk in the light of your presence, LORD. They rejoice in your name all day long; they celebrate your righteousness. For you are their glory and strength..." (NIV)

Psalm 31:14-20 "But I trust in you, LORD... my times are in your hands... How abundant are the good things that you have stored up for those who fear you... on those who take refuge in you. In the shelter of your presence... you keep them safe..." (NIV)

Isaiah 42:5,6 "This is what God the LORD says – the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: 'I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you... a light...'" (NIV)

For the man or woman walking with God beneath the uncertain skies of a fallen world, the journey will most likely bring all the seasons of life, and with these seasons all the paralleling elements of nature, some welcome and some unwelcome. But God's Word provides no weather forecasts, and there are no guarantees. We don't necessarily know what clothes to bring with us on the journey. However, we do

know with absolute certainty one thing: No matter what the weather, all sunshine or all rain, or a pleasant mixture of the two, at the end of the day we will be sitting there with a big ole pot of gold.

ULTIMATELY, JOY AND PEACE ARE THE *ONLY* THINGS GOD TRULY PROMISES TO PROVIDE IN THIS LIFE.

The heart of the drama of human history.

Sometimes it's only natural to think: Wouldn't it be nice to know with absolute certainty that if I do "x," I will get the girl (or boy) of my dreams. Or if I do "y," I will get the job. And if I do "z," I will get the 2.5 kids and the five bedroom house on the golf course with the three car garage.

But where's the adventure in that? Where's the faith? Where's the relationship? That's not a life with God. That's a contract with a service provider. I do this and you do that. If you don't, I'll sue.

There is a great drama unfolding throughout human history, as the grace of God and the freewill of mankind play out their respective parts, and in the midst of all the themes and counter themes, God is not going to get bogged down with petty *quid pro quo*. He cuts straight to the heart of it all and says: Trust Me, and no matter what you have or do not have, no matter where you go or what you do, I will give you what you truly long for – Joy (inexpressible) and Peace (surpassing comprehension). Then none of the other stuff will matter.

That's an adventure! That's a relationship! That makes the journey of life meaningful, dramatic, and fun. God is in control. He leads the way. And He is a much better guide than we could ever be.

Proverbs 3:5,6 "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight." (NIV)

Isaiah 48:17 "This is what the LORD says – your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: 'I am the LORD your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go.'" (NIV)

We want certainty with the material things, but the truth of the matter is, there is no certainty in this fallen world as it relates to the *things*. Instead, there is certainty with the *life*. God doesn't promise what you will *have*. He promises how you can *be*.

1 Timothy 6:17-19 "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.” (NIV)

Meaning, impact, fulfillment, and wonder.

We look at the scriptures and we find that God doesn't promise money, power, fame, or any material thing during our brief time on earth. Nor does He promise marriage, children, health, or ease. This is not to say that most of us won't experience these things to some degree. Most of us will. But there are no guarantees, and there are many examples throughout the Bible and in our common experience of good men and women whose lives were marked by suffering and dreams that didn't come true.

But some men and women come to know something greater than prosperity and success as the world sees it. They come to know Joy and Peace, in times of prosperity and even in their darkest hour. In fact, they know it in their brightest hour, their darkest hour, and every shade in between, because the Joy and Peace that God promises to give each and every one of us are not dependent upon our circumstances, but rather upon our relationship with Him.

In His eternal, changeless Word, God promises you this: No matter what His plan or purpose for your life, no matter where life takes you, you can know true Joy and true Peace. You can wake up every morning excited to meet the day with confidence and courage. And no matter what happens, even if your world seems to fall apart, you can go to bed feeling safe, secure, and content.

Philippians 4:11-20 “I (*Paul*) have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me... And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 7:4 “... in all our troubles my (*Paul's*) joy knows no bounds.” (NIV)

Habakkuk 3:17-19 “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength...” (NIV)

Isaiah 26:3,4 “The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect peace, because he trusts in You. Trust in the LORD forever, for in GOD the LORD, we have an everlasting Rock.” (NASB)

Psalms 128:1,2 “How blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in His ways. When you shall eat of the fruit of your hands, you will be happy and it will be well with you.” (NASB)

If you choose a relationship with God over the temporary distractions of the world, then your life will mean something. It will have impact. It will fulfill. And as we will explore briefly in the Coda at the end of this work, in eternity there are literally no words to describe the wonders God has in store for those who put their faith in Him.

John 15:16 “... I (*Jesus*) chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last...” (NIV)

Hebrews 11:6 “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 2:9 “but just as it is written, ‘THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.’ ” (NASB)

We can know Joy and Peace. We can be fulfilled. We can experience lives of meaning and impact. Or we cannot. Because...

ULTIMATELY, WHETHER WE FIND JOY AND PEACE IS A CHOICE.

The most fundamental question in all of life.

God offers us Joy and Peace, but whether we experience them depends on whether we are willing to receive them, by choosing to put our faith in Jesus and then follow Him. Joy and Peace are gifts that can be eagerly received or left unclaimed, and to be received they require a conscious choice to reject the distractions of the world in favor of a relationship with God.

Perhaps the most fundamental question in all of life is: Who (or what) will be our Joy and bring our Peace? If Joy and Peace are ultimately the only things we truly desire in life, then where we seek to find them must be the most basic question of our existence.

In the end, there are only two possible answers to this question: The distractions of the world, or a relationship with God. There is nowhere else to look, and the choice we make reveals who we truly are, and who (or what) truly is our God.

Joshua 24:14,15 “... serve him with all faithfulness... But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...” (NIV)

Isaiah 58:13,14 “If you keep... from doing as you please... not going your own way... then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance...” (NIV)

Jeremiah 15:16 “... Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart...”
(NASB)

Proverbs 4:23 “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.” (NASB)

Matthew 6:19-24 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” (NASB)

Philippians 3:8-21 “... I (*Paul*) count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord... forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore... have this attitude... let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained. Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.” (NASB)

Answering this question can be very difficult. It’s a struggle to choose between the voice of our nature to sin and the voice of the Spirit of God, both of which call out to us. Both voices are there, ready to guide our thoughts, words, and deeds, if we will let them.

James 1:13,14 “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.”
(NASB)

Galatians 5:16,17 “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another...” (NASB)

Romans 8:13 “For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.” (NIV)

Which voice prevails is up to us, and the struggle to choose between them can seem overwhelming. How can we find the courage to make the right choice?

Overcoming temptation.

The distractions of the world are very real temptations. Money is nice. So can be fame and power. Some people like to gamble, get drunk, and do drugs. Nearly everyone likes sex. Within God's plan for our lives, some of these things – like money, fame, influence, and sex – can have wonderful, legitimate places. Outside of God's plan, all of these things can destroy us. How can we overcome the temptation to indulge ourselves in the things of the world when they are not in keeping with the plan of God for our lives?

This is something everyone struggles with. Here we'll look at five basic principles that help us understand and overcome the temptations common to all mankind. The first two tell it like it is, and the last three offer encouragement.

1. It will never be easy.

If you are waiting for God to zap you with some magic cattle prod that will turn you into a man or woman of steel, who finds none of the myriad vices in the world to be the least bit tempting, you are going to have a very, very long wait.

Overcoming temptation will *never* be easy. Why? Because it's not *meant* to be easy. It's meant to be hard. Whether we will resist temptation is a test of character whereby we can grow from spiritual babies to spiritual adults and then serve our Lord. If it was easy, it wouldn't be a test. If it's not a test, we're not going to grow. If we never grow, we'll never be able to serve God.

1 Peter 1:1-17 “... To God's elect, strangers in the world... Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power... In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy... Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

1 Peter 4:19 “Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

2. It will (most likely) never just go away.

Similarly, if you've got your head in the sand, waiting for the temptation to just go away and leave you alone, get used to that posture, because unless you are quite exceptional that temptation is going to still be there staring you in the eye when you come up for air.

Temptations rarely just go away. Why should they? How can we grow from that? It's not God's will for us to tiptoe *around* temptation. God wants us to suffer *through* temptation, and come out on the other side stronger, smarter, closer to Him, and knowing more Joy and Peace than we did before the experience. Denial is not an option with temptation. Temptation must be faced and overcome.

James 1:2-4 “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (NASB)

Psalms 20:1-9 “May the LORD answer you when you are in distress... May he send you help... May he give you the desire of your heart... Now this I know: The LORD gives victory to his anointed. He answers him from his heavenly sanctuary with the victorious power of his right hand. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God... we rise up and stand firm. LORD... Answer us when we call!” (NIV)

Revelation 2:18-28 “... The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this: ‘I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first... he who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, TO HIM I WILL GIVE AUTHORITY OVER THE NATIONS; AND HE SHALL RULE THEM WITH A ROD OF IRON, AS THE VESSELS OF THE POTTER ARE BROKEN TO PIECES, as I also have received authority from My Father; and I will give him the morning star.’ ” (NASB)

3. It will never be too much.

Now for the good news. God never tempts us more than we can handle. God wants us to stretch and grow, not stretch and break. God can be tough on His kids when it is ultimately for our good, but He is never sadistic. He would never test us, knowing beforehand the test is impossible for us to pass. He loves us too much for that! And so God promises His grace will always be there to help us overcome temptation.

1 Corinthians 10:13 “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.” (NASB)

2 Chronicles 16:9 “For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His...” (NASB)

2 Peter 2:9 “... the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation...” (NASB)

Paul's life is a good example. Paul endured some sort of "thorn in the flesh" (we don't know what it was) that was a hindrance to him throughout his ministry. The temptation to become discouraged or angry about it would have been very great. Three times he asked God to take it away, but God's only reply was "My grace is sufficient for you..." The test was not easy. It did not go away. But God's grace was greater than the temptation to sin, and Paul's reliance on God's grace made him strong and useful in God's service.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 "... to keep me (*Paul*) from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh... Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong." (NASB)

How does God help us overcome temptation? What grace is extended sufficient to ensure temptation is never too much? The answers are two things we have seen over and over again throughout this study: God's Word and God's Spirit.

Through our understanding of God's Word, God's Spirit shows us right from wrong. Then the choice is ours – to resist the temptation or succumb to it. If we choose to resist, God's Spirit will give us the strength to do what's right. If we choose to succumb, God's Spirit will allow us to go our own way.

Ephesians 3:16,17 "... be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith..." (NASB)

Philippians 4:13 "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." (NASB)

Isaiah 40:28-31 "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth... gives strength to the weary, and to him who lacks might He increases power... those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary." (NASB)

Romans 8:26 "... the Spirit helps us in our weakness..." (NIV)

In a sense, the struggle is not with knowing right from wrong, or with finding the strength to do right. The struggle is with *choosing* to do right. That's the one thing God will not do for us. We have to choose for ourselves who we will be and how we will live in this fallen world. And therein lies the struggle.

As we have seen, God's Word, God's Spirit, and our freewill work together like a road map, automobile, and driver. God's Word is the road map. It clearly tells us where to go. God's Spirit is the car, gassed up, running like a top, and ready to take

us to our final destination. But we have to get in the car and choose to use it to follow the map to where it leads. Following the map and driving the car are easy. But getting out of the car, disregarding the map, and getting lost are just as easy, all depending on the decisions we freely choose to make.

It's interesting to note that, in helping us with temptation, it's not God's way to weaken the temptation so it's easier for us to overcome. Instead, God strengthens us so we can conquer the temptation just as it is. God doesn't lower the bar so we can easily hop over. He strengthens our legs so we clear the bar where it stands. God doesn't diminish the seductive nature of temptation. He develops a Christ-like character in His children that is strong, faithful, and true.

And there's no way around it, there is an element of suffering in overcoming temptation. It requires a decision to forego something our natures to sin really want. But it's these difficult decisions that strip away the impurities in our characters, and refine our hearts like gold.

Proverbs 17:3 “The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tests hearts.” (NASB)

1 Peter 3:17 “For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.” (NASB)

1 Peter 4:19 “Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

God's Spirit gives us the strength to endure the suffering inherent in temptation, so we can grow closer to God and be of service to Him in a fallen world. Resisting temptation will never be easy, no matter how many times we endure it. Unfortunately, temptation will never lose its allure.

But it is not the purpose of God's Word or Spirit to remove the lure of temptation. Rather it is to make us even stronger than temptation. It is to strengthen and comfort us through suffering, rather than guide us around it. There is no glory for God, blessing for us, or light to the world, when we take the easy, expedient road of compromise. Only when we suffer through temptation and do the right but difficult thing do we please the Lord. In this way God's Spirit takes our character and forges it like iron, until it is more powerful than all the allure of undiminished temptation.

Job 23:10 “... when he (*God*) has tested me, I will come forth as gold.” (NIV)

1 Peter 2:18-20 “Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable. For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God.” (NASB)

Luke 6:27-36 “... love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you... If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same... But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (NASB)

Then you are transformed into the likeness of Christ. You develop a Christ-like holiness, with the capacity for life, blessing, and service to the Lord. You know Joy and Peace, even while suffering temptation. Your happiness is intensified and your relationship with God is tempered like steel. And when you pass the test, you know happiness you never would have known if you had never suffered. You are stronger, more resilient to changing circumstances, and more reliant upon the Lord; and you have a great memory of when the Father was there for you. You are prepared for even greater trials and service in the future. And you find your Joy and Peace in the Lord, rather than ease of circumstance. This is God’s will for your life.

2 Peter 1:3-8 “... His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him... He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature... Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (NASB)

Isaiah 58:11-14 “The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail... not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance...” (NIV)

Psalms 30:1-12 “I will exalt you, LORD, for you lifted me out of the depths... I called to you for help, and you healed me... To you, LORD, I called; to the Lord I cried for mercy... You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. LORD my God, I will praise you forever.” (NIV)

Psalms 18:1-49 “I love you, LORD, my strength. The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I called to the LORD, who is worthy of praise, and I have been saved from my enemies... In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help... in the day of my disaster, but the

LORD was my support... he rescued me... Therefore I will praise you, LORD, among the nations; I will sing the praises of your name.” (NIV)

1 Thessalonians 5:5-28 “You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled... since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that... we may live together with Him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up... Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus... Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil... May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and He will do it... The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

And although there is certainly an element of suffering in overcoming temptation, there are also certain common sense things we can do to keep the suffering to a minimum.

4. Good choices will minimize the struggle.

If you are an alcoholic, don’t work at a liquor store. And while you’re at it, don’t stock your bar at home with your favorite bourbon. You also might want to start hanging around with people who drink responsibly.

If you are trying to stay sexually pure, cancel your subscription to Playboy. Stay away from strip clubs. Treat the internet with care. Date people with similar values.

If you are going to have to fight an elephant, fight the elephant while it’s a baby. Don’t give it a place to feed and grow up to be big and strong. Wrestling an elephant will never be easy, but it’s much better to wrestle a baby than a bull.

The idea is: Don’t let temptations take root, fester, and grow. Don’t park your car on temptation’s railroad tracks, pull out a magazine, and wait for the train to arrive. Stay away from things that put you in harm’s way from the very beginning, so they never have an opportunity to sink their teeth into you.

If you follow this advice, the temptations you encounter will be in their infant stages. You can defeat them while they are weak, and you won’t allow them to develop into full blown addictions. If you know the position of temptation’s crosshairs, *stay away*.

Proverbs 4:14-18 “Do not enter the path of the wicked and do not proceed in the way of evil men. Avoid it, do not pass by it; turn away from it and pass on. For they cannot sleep unless they do evil; and they are robbed of sleep unless they make someone stumble...But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, that shines brighter and brighter until the full day.” (NASB)

Psalm 119:9-133 “How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word... do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you... Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things... Turn my eyes away from worthless things... Teach me knowledge and good judgment... I have kept my feet from every evil path so that I might obey your word... Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path... The wicked have set a snare for me, but I have not strayed from your precepts... The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple... Direct my footsteps according to your word; let no sin rule over me.” (NIV)

Hebrews 12:15 “See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled;” (NASB)

Ephesians 4:27 “and do not give the devil a foothold.” (NIV)

The other thing to do is: *Pray*. There are many examples in the Bible of God instructing us to pray for deliverance from temptation. Jesus instructed His disciples to do so. It’s even part of the Lord’s Prayer. God loves to answer prayers for strength during temptation, and there is something about the simple act of praying for help that lends us tremendous strength and power in our struggles with temptation.

Matthew 26:40,41 “Then he (*Jesus*) returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. ‘Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?’ he asked Peter. ‘Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.’ ” (NIV)

Matthew 6:9-13 “This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.’ ” (NIV)

When you are tempted, follow Jesus’ example. The night before He was crucified, Jesus struggled with the temptation to avoid the cross in such agony that He sweat blood and nearly died. But He called upon all His knowledge of God’s Word, so He was focused on His purpose, and the right decision was clear. Then He went to God in prayer. He poured His heart out to God and chose to obey the Father’s will. And the Spirit gave Him the power to resist temptation infinitely greater than anything we will ever face.

Hebrews 12:1-14 “... let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing

our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood... Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. 'Make level paths for your feet,' so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord." (NIV)

Hebrews 2:18 "For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted." (NASB)

Our Savior had to endure untold suffering. Jesus voluntarily turned Himself over to evil, horrible men, to be beaten, spit upon, mocked, and scourged. He then marched obediently to the cross, and paid for the sins of the world.

If we will go to God's Word and seek our purpose in God's plan, our paths will become clear. Then as we humbly approach the Lord in prayer, pour our hearts out to Him, and choose to obey the Father's will, God's Spirit will boldly empower us to resist any temptation, and though the struggle within us may be great, God's sustaining power will guide us all the way until finally the temptation is defeated, and all that remains is the Joy and Peace God gives to all those who will choose to receive His grace.

Resisting temptation will still be difficult, as by definition it must be, but the assurance and strength God provides will be greater still, and God's Word and Spirit will win the day. If you will choose to be faithful and true through the hardship of temptation, you will receive the blessing of God in this life and on into the next, when time is meaningless and temptation is only a memory.

Romans 8:18 "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us." (NASB)

2 Corinthians 4:17,18 "For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal." (NASB)

1 Peter 5:10 "After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you." (NASB)

1 Corinthians 2:9 "but just as it is written, 'THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.'" (NASB)

Galatians 6:7-10 "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we

will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people..." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

And if you fail, as all of us inevitably will, there's still good news.

5. If you fail, it's not over.

With God, as long as you're still breathing, you get a second chance... and a third chance... and a fourth chance... and on and on. God won't give up on you. You can only give up on Him. His love for us is infinite and absolute, and only one thing in all the universe can hinder it – our own decisions. So if we will choose to return to Him, God will always forgive our failures and provide us with another chance.

Ecclesiastes 9:4 "Anyone who is among the living has hope..." (NIV)

2 Timothy 2:13 "If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself." (NASB)

2 Peter 3:9 "The Lord is... patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance." (NASB)

1 Chronicles 28:9 "... serve Him with a whole heart and a willing mind; for the LORD searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will reject you..." (NASB)

Ezekiel 18:21-32 "But if a wicked person turns away from all the sins they have committed... None of the offenses they have committed will be remembered against them... Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?... Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit... For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!" (NIV)

Lamentations 3:31-42 "For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone... Why should the living complain when punished for their sins? Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD. Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven, and say: 'We have sinned and rebelled...'" (NIV)

Everyone fails sooner or later. This, unfortunately, is part of the human condition. The important thing is not to let failure discourage us. God loves us still, even after we fail Him, and always forgives and renews a repentant heart. Run *to* Him when you fail, not away from Him, and He will embrace you as a loving father. He may also discipline you as a loving father to get you back on the right path, but He will *never* turn you away. God truly loves us with an indescribable love!

Romans 8:1-16 “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus... you have received a spirit of adoption... that we are children of God,” (NASB)

Hebrews 12:5-11 “... DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES... God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline... He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.” (NASB)

Micah 7:18,19 “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression... You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.” (NIV)

Psalms 86:5 “You, Lord, are forgiving and good, abounding in love to all who call to you.” (NIV)

If we succumb to temptation, the thing to do is:

❖ Confess our sin privately to God in prayer;

Jeremiah 3:12,13 “... I will not look upon you in anger. For I am gracious... Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the LORD your God...” (NASB)

Psalms 32:5 “I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD’; and You forgave the guilt of my sin.” (NASB)

1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (NASB)

❖ Make good choices so it does not happen again; and

Hebrews 12:13 “and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.” (NASB)

❖ Put it behind us and move on.

Philippians 3:13,14 “... forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (NASB)

This wonderful truth that God will always forgive and renew a repentant heart can be distorted. Some will wrongly see it as a permission slip to wallow in sin the way a pig wallows in filth – indulging in sin, then repenting, then repeatedly returning to the sin, knowing all the while there is no intention of ever really trying to overcome the

temptation. But God's willingness to forgive is not a license to sin. It is a gift granted to genuinely repentant hearts. Disingenuous hearts ultimately find only misery and despair.

Proverbs 26:11 "As a dog returns to its vomit, so fools repeat their folly." (NIV)

Jude 1:4 "For certain individuals... have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality..." (NIV)

2 Peter 2:9-22 "... the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgment. This is especially true of those who follow the corrupt desire of the flesh and despise authority. Bold and arrogant, they... are like unreasoning animals, creatures of instinct, born only to be caught and destroyed, and like animals they too will perish... they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable... they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of the flesh, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity - for 'people are slaves to whatever has mastered them.' If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and are overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. Of them the proverbs are true: 'A dog returns to its vomit,' and, 'A sow that is washed returns to her wallowing in the mud.'" (NIV)

There is a difference between having a bad *day* and having bad *habits*. Everyone has bad days (meaning we make isolated bad decisions), and will continue to have them occasionally until this life is over. But bad habits (meaning we make the same bad decisions over and over again) are unacceptable, and reflect a serious crisis at the very core of our being.

To overcome bad habits, we must search inside ourselves and discover what the fundamental problem within us is. The specific answers to this riddle will be different for each of us, but many times (not always, but many times) the general answer will be the same. If there is a temptation or sin you cannot seem to overcome, a destructive habit that is controlling your life and keeping you from becoming the person you want to be, many times the reason is: You hold some grievance with God that keeps you from totally surrendering your life to Him.

IN ORDER TO CHOOSE TO KNOW JOY AND PEACE, WE MUST SET ASIDE ALL GRIEVANCES WITH GOD.

There is something in life you desperately want that you will not get.

We don't really like to admit it, but if we are truthful with ourselves, we must confess that, at least at certain times in our lives, we all carry grievances with God. Unless your life is extraordinarily exceptional, there is something you really want that you do not have. As you get older, it starts to sink in you may never have it. And as you near the end of your life, you realize you will never have it. A certain dream did not and will not ever come true.

When we don't get what we want, it's easy to let a seed of bitterness take root in our souls. There it can lie dormant for a season or begin its life cycle, but eventually it grows into a deep rooted grievance with God that must be brought into the open, pulled out by the roots, and thrown into the wood chopper. If we don't, this unresolved grievance can lead to destructive habits of myriad forms, and we will never know Joy and Peace.

Hebrews 12:15 “See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled;” (NASB)

What kind of “grievances” are we talking about? There are as many as there are people on the planet. It might be personal appearance (I'm fat... I'm ugly... I'm short... I'm bald...). It might be natural abilities (I'm not smart... I'm not talented... I'm not athletic... I'm not funny...). It might be status (I'm not married... I'm not rich... I'm not popular... I'm not famous...). It might be something bad that happened to you (my parents didn't love me... I was the victim of a terrible crime... God let someone I loved die...). It might be something good that didn't happen to you (my dream of [fill in the blank] never came true...). We could go on and on. You get the idea.

Psalms 73:1-24 “Surely God is good... to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped... For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked... When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you...” (NIV)

In a sense, all of the above are legitimate things to be upset about. They hurt deeply, and can easily cause us to become bitter towards God. We start to think: If He really exists, and if He really loves me, then why did He let this happen? Would it really have been so hard for God to let my little dream come true?

As these feelings take root, what sort of “bad habits” can spring up? Usually, it's an addiction of some kind that temporarily distracts us from the hurt. I'm not rich, so I'll gamble what I have trying to become rich. I didn't get the girl or boy I want, so I'll sleep around. I'm not beautiful, so I'll eat my way to obesity. My dream didn't come true, so I'll numb myself with drugs and alcohol.

Our grievances can also lead to bitter attitudes, wherein cynicism and hateful feelings become the addictions that temporarily distract us from the hurt. We feel better by feeling bad. For example: “My parents are so screwed up, there can never be healthy relationships, so I’m never getting married. I was wronged, and no one helped me, so I’m not helping anyone else. Someone I loved died, and God didn’t save him, so there must be no God. God made me (what I consider) a freak, so I’m going to live like one.” Again, we could go on and on. How do we deal with these feelings, so they don’t take root and overcome our very souls?

First, bring your feelings out into the open. Talk to God about them. Be *completely* truthful with Him. Complain. Moan. Gripe all you want. Don’t try to hide your hurt and anger. Honesty with God is very therapeutic. He already knows exactly what you are feeling, so shoot straight with Him.

Psalm 44:21 “... God... knows the secrets of the heart.” (NASB)

Once your feelings are in the open, then God and you can start to deal constructively with the problem. Most likely, it’s going to take mass quantities of prayer, meditation on God’s Word, encouragement from good friends, time, perhaps counseling, and when an addiction is medically based, professional treatment. But at the end of the day, it’s all about *humility*. Are you willing to trust God with your life, and serve Him with all of your heart, *even if you don’t get what you want?* You have to decide: Even if my dream doesn’t come true, I will follow Jesus – and not grudgingly, but with an open, willing heart.

2 Corinthians 9:7 “Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” (NASB)

Daniel 3:16-18 “Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, ‘King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.’ ” (NIV)

Job 13:15 “Though He slay me, I will hope in Him...” (NASB)

When we do this, something miraculous happens: The desires of our hearts change! Not that we don’t still long for an unrealized dream, but our passion for Christ is greater than our passion for the dream. And we grow to find true Joy and true Peace without the dream, because the Joy and Peace we ultimately seek do not reside in a vision of something that is in truth a fantasy, but rather in a friendship with our Savior that is real and alive.

Psalm 73:25-28 “... besides You, I desire nothing on earth... God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever... the nearness of God is my good...” (NASB)

Psalm 37:4 “Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart.” (NASB)

When we arrive at a place where we can accept the possibility that the dream might never come true, and without bitterness still trust God, then life takes on an immediacy and poignancy. You are alive and part of the drama of human history. You know Joy and Peace, with or without the dream. Your self-esteem, beaten down and strangled nearly to death by the grievance, will break free and grow by leaps and bounds as you are able to set the grievance aside and draw your sense of self-worth and dignity, not from realizing the dream, but from walking by faith humbly with God.

Micah 6:8 “... what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (NIV)

Psalm 89:15-17 “Blessed are those who have learned to... walk in the light of your presence, LORD. They rejoice in your name all day long; they celebrate your righteousness. For you are their glory and strength...” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 5:7 “for we walk by faith, not by sight” (NASB)

Then things get exciting! When God sees this kind of faith in His children, He is able to do mighty things *within* them, *through* them, and *for* them. He can take His children, create an unquenchable Joy and Peace within them, and place them anywhere in any circumstance, whether it is in the world’s most glamorous spotlight or the world’s most impoverished corner, and His faithful children will know inexpressible Joy and unsurpassable Peace and bring God’s undiminished light to a fallen world.

Isaiah 42:5,6 “This is what God the LORD says – the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: ‘I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you... a light...’ ” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 4:6-10 “For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.” (NASB)

Romans 6:11-14 “... count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus... do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires... rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. For sin shall no longer be your master...” (NIV)

Acts 1:8 “but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” (NASB)

Isaiah 58:11-14 “The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail... you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance...” (NIV)

Why doesn't God fulfill the dream? The answer is *always* the same: Because He has something better in mind. What we want sounds great. We can't imagine anything better, and we don't want to imagine anything better. But there *is* something better, and God has it, standing by ready to be released to you, if you will set aside your grievance and trust Him.

1 Peter 1:3,4 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope... to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you,” (NASB)

Jeremiah 29:11 “ ‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’ ” (NIV)

Ephesians 1:18,19 “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe...” (NASB)

That person we want, or that career we want, or that physical attribute we want, might just be the worst thing that could ever happen to us. That person might actually be the most unfitting partner on the planet. That career might take you to the wrong city. That physical attribute might prevent you from achieving something God has for you to do in this life.

Ecclesiastes 6:12 “For who knows what is good for a man during his lifetime...?” (NASB)

Isaiah 48:17 “This is what the LORD says – your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: ‘I am the LORD your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go.’ ” (NIV)

And that disaster – the crime, the death, the betrayal – may in some mysterious way teach you a lesson you will desperately need somewhere down the road in your life. You may gain some special insight or wisdom that will not only help you, but also help others. And, especially in helping others, you will find more Joy and more Peace than you would have ever experienced if the disaster had never occurred in the first place.

2 Corinthians 1:3-5 “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.” (NIV)

Then we discover that the hurt, while very real, was not a legitimate grievance with God, but rather an integral part of His perfect plan for our lives. It was part of His design, whereby He takes the injustices of a fallen world and weaves them together with His grace and the freewill of mankind, and creates a tapestry of unparalleled beauty – unflinching in its depiction of the realities of a fallen world, and unveiled in its revelation of God’s great and glorious purpose.

1 Peter 1:1-17 “... To God’s elect, strangers in the world... Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power... In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy... Since you call on a Father who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

If we are seeking God, and we don’t get something we want, we have God’s Word there is a good reason we didn’t get it. It was not a part of His plan. God’s plan calls for something better. We have to trust Him, and in time we will discover what that something better is.

1 Peter 4:12-19 “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed... Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

Romans 8:18 “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (NASB)

Proverbs 3:5,6 “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” (NIV)

These principles are perhaps some of the most difficult to understand and accept in all of God's Word, and we will return to look at them from different perspectives later in this study after we have gained insight into related truths. For now, let's consider some examples from the Bible:

- ❖ David wanted to build the Temple of God in Israel. God wanted Solomon to do build it. Instead of David building God a house, God built David a house, by bringing the Messiah into the world through David's bloodline, which became known as the "house of David." See 1 Chronicles 17, 22, 28.
- ❖ Mary and Martha wanted Jesus to heal Lazarus. Jesus let Lazarus die. Then Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, one of Jesus' most remarkable and important miracles. See John 11:1-45.
- ❖ Paul wanted to continue his missionary journeys. He wound up in jail, and all he could do was write letters. The letters became the majority of the New Testament.
- ❖ Jesus didn't want to go to the cross. The Father sent Him anyway. Our salvation was accomplished, and now Jesus sits at the "right hand of the throne of God."

Hebrews 12:1-14 "... let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood... Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. 'Make level paths for your feet,' so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord." (NIV)

In each of these examples a deeply desired request was denied, and initially it seemed devastating. But none of these individuals lost their faith, and ultimately God brought about some far, far greater good in the world and blessing to the individual. God will do the same thing for us, if we will trust Him when all seems lost.

Isaiah 50:10 "... Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on their God." (NIV)

Micah 7:7,8 "But as for me, I will watch expectantly for the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me. Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy. Though I fall I will rise; though I dwell in darkness, the LORD is a light for me." (NASB)

Deny yourself and take up your cross.

One of the things Jesus commanded us to do was to “deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Him.” What exactly does that mean?

Luke 9:23 “And He (*Jesus*) was saying to them all, ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me.’ ” (NASB)

For Jesus, the cross was the ultimate test of humility. It was the focal point of God’s plan for His life, the symbol of His purpose as the “Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world” (see John 1:29). It was also the darkest, most difficult trial any human being would ever suffer by far.

Think of how Jesus must have felt (after being brutally scourged, mocked, beaten, spat upon, and crowned with thorns) as He was presented with the heavy cross He would have to carry to the site of His execution by the most painful means ever conceived by man. He did not have to pick up that cross. He could have called upon His divine power and destroyed every person on the planet. Instead, He picked up the cross, laid it across His wounded back, and began walking towards Golgotha.

Matthew 27:1-30 “Now when morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus to put Him to death; and they bound Him, and led Him away and delivered Him to Pilate the governor. Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor questioned Him... he knew that because of envy they had handed Him over... But... When Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather that a riot was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, saying, ‘I am innocent of this Man’s blood’... but after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified. Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole Roman cohort around Him. They stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him. And after twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand; and they knelt down before Him and mocked Him, saying, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’ They spat on Him, and took the reed and began to beat Him on the head.” (NASB)

John 19:1-18 “Pilate then took Jesus and scourged Him. And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and put a purple robe on Him; and they began to come up to Him and say, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’ and to give Him slaps in the face. Pilate came out again and said to them, ‘Behold, I am bringing Him out to you so that you may know that I find no guilt in Him’... they cried out, ‘Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him!’... So he then handed Him over to them to be crucified. They took Jesus, therefore, and He went out, bearing His own cross, to the place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha. There they crucified Him...” (NASB)

How could He do that? What gave Him the strength of will to take up the cross, instead of destroy His enemies?

To begin with, Jesus trusted God. Jesus knew that if the cross was God's will for His life, it was better than any plan Jesus could ever conceive on His own. Jesus did not become bitter that God's will was for Him to die for the sins of all humanity. It did not become a grievance with God that destroyed His relationship with the Father. Instead, in the greatest act of humility of all time, Jesus accepted God's plan for His life, denied His understandable desire to avoid the agony, and willingly took up the cross.

John 14:30,31 “*I (Jesus) will not speak much more with you... (because Jesus would go to the cross the next day)* but so that the world may know that I love the Father, I do exactly as the Father commanded Me...” (NASB)

Matthew 26:36-46 “Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, ‘Sit here while I go over there and pray.’ He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, ‘My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.’ Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.’ Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. ‘Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?’ he asked Peter. ‘Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.’ He went away a second time and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.’ When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing. Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, ‘Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!’ ” (NIV)

Jesus also knew that His death on the cross was not the end of the story. His test would not end with a sealed grave, but rather an empty tomb, with Jesus seated at the “right hand of the Father” with all glory, honor, and praise directed towards Him as the Savior of all mankind. Jesus looked ahead to the “joy set before Him,” and was able to take up the cross because of His confidence that – whatever the cost – it would be worth it, and His faithfulness would be rewarded.

Hebrews 12:1-3 “... let us also lay aside every encumbrance... fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” (NASB)

On a much smaller scale, each of us will have our own figurative cross (or crosses) thrown down before us at some point during the journey of our lives. It will be some

sort of burden, brought about by the injuries, disappointments, and injustices of a fallen world, which tests us at our very core. Everything within us will want to reject this burden, but it will also be equally clear that God's will is for us to carry the weight. And just as Jesus had a choice to turn and run, or pick up and walk, so too we will have a choice whether to bear the burden.

The choice we make will depend upon whether we are able to follow Jesus' example, by trusting in God and His plan, and keeping our eyes on the Joy set before us; that is, the reward God promises to those who follow Jesus. This will require us to deny ourselves and have faith in Him. We must humbly choose to set aside our natural repulsion for the burden, along with any bitterness or grievance we might feel towards God, and in our faith take up the challenge.

Philippians 2:5-11 "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (NASB)

The overwhelmingly good news is that as we carry our cross God will support us with the same grace He gave to Jesus. His grace will be sufficient to empower us through every trial, and He promises to never test us beyond our abilities to endure. We are not called to walk this path alone. We are called to walk our path with Him, every step of the way.

John 8:12 "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.' " (NIV)

Psalms 89:15-17 "Blessed are those who have learned to... walk in the light of your presence, LORD. They rejoice in your name all day long; they celebrate your righteousness. For you are their glory and strength..." (NIV)

Psalms 23:1-6 "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." (NASB)

2 Corinthians 9:8 "And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work." (NIV)

2 Corinthians 12:5-10 "... I will not boast about myself (*Paul*), except about my weaknesses... to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong." (NIV)

1 Corinthians 10:13 "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it." (NASB)

Isaiah 40:28-31 "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." (NIV)

Isaiah 42:5,6 "This is what God the LORD says – the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: 'I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you... a light...'" (NIV)

And one day our ordeal, whatever it is, will come to an end. And just as Jesus' story did not end in a grave, but rather at the very right hand of God, our story, if we are faithful, will end in *exactly* the same way. We will not end up as a bag of bones rotting in a grave. We will carry our crosses along our appointed path, overcoming every obstacle by God's grace, until one glorious day we are invited to lay down our burdens and take our seat next to the One whose example we followed. More on this in the Coda to this work.

John 14:1,2 "Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me (*Jesus*). In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you." (NASB)

Revelation 3:21 "He who overcomes, I (*Jesus*) will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne." (NASB)

Jesus took up the cross of *all* humanity. We are to take up the cross of *our own* humanity. As a member of the human race, we will have a singular burden to carry – some hurt, disappointment, or injustice – that is unique to the life to which we are called. But as we take it up and carry it (through the grace God provides), and endure it as Jesus endured the cross, then we are also lifted up from the fallen world, from a

place of emptiness and despair to a place of Joy “inexpressible” and Peace “surpassing comprehension,” in times of both great prosperity and even terrible adversity. We lose our lives, but we save them.

Lose your life and save it – Save your life and lose it.

God’s ways are not our ways. In fact, the ways of God are often the exact opposite of the ways of the world. We want a fulfilling life, so we spend our time on earth in selfish pursuits. But God tells us that to have a fulfilling life we must spend our time on earth in *selfless* pursuits. We set aside our grievances with God, and also set aside our selfish desires. We “deny ourselves” and follow Jesus. In so doing, we discover what we truly seek: The life and destiny for which God in eternity past determined to save us.

Luke 9:23,24 “... Whoever wants to be my (*Jesus*’) disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.” (NIV)

If we reject God, we eventually drown in our own arrogance. We set off into the waters of a fallen world, some making it a little way, others quite far. But all end up adrift in an icy sea, where the tropical paradise we hoped to find turns out to be a mirage in the desert. And deserts are hot during the day, but deadly cold at night.

In the same way, whatever worldly paradise we create for ourselves may produce the warmth we seek for a little while, but eventually the night comes and the cold creeps in. The mirage turns to mist, and we find ourselves caught in a powerful current, sweeping us further and further out to sea, until there is no land in sight, and swim as we might, our arrogance finally drags us down to the depths. Our lives were phantoms, empty spirits slowly drowning in a fallen world, deceiving and being deceived, all with the same, sad end. We thought we were saving our lives, but in truth all along we were losing them.

2 Corinthians 11:3-15 “But I (*Paul*) am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. For if one comes and preaches... a different gospel... such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness...” (NASB)

Romans 16:18 “For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.” (NASB)

Revelation 3:17 “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.” (NIV)

2 Timothy 4:3,4 “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.” (NASB)

2 Timothy 3:2-17 “... men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant... holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; avoid such men as these. For among them are those who enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth... these men also oppose the truth, men of depraved mind... their folly will be obvious to all... But evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” (NASB)

2 Peter 3:15-18 “... Paul... wrote to you... these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard so that you are not carried away by the error of unprincipled men and fall from your own steadfastness, but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ...” (NASB)

Philippians 3:8-21 “... I (*Paul*) count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord... For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.” (NASB)

Ezekiel 18:30-32 “... I (*God*) will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit... For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!” (NIV)

Humble hearts are pulled out from the icy sea of the fallen world by the grace of God. They are warmed and strengthened. They are given an opportunity to grow. Then, they are cast back into the sea, but instead of foundering, they make music.

Psalms 46:1-10 “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains

quake... The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress... He says, 'Be still, and know that I am God...'" (NIV)

Psalm 30:1-12 "I will exalt you, LORD, for you lifted me out of the depths... I called to you for help, and you healed me... To you, LORD, I called; to the Lord I cried for mercy... You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. LORD my God, I will praise you forever." (NIV)

WHEN WE CHOOSE TO KNOW JOY AND PEACE, WE BECOME INSTRUMENTS IN THE HANDS OF THE LIVING GOD.

Spoons and Stradivarii.

A great artist can make music with just about anything, whether it's a pair of cheap spoons from the kitchen drawer or a centuries old Stradivarius. Which instrument is chosen depends on the music, and the instrument's ability to create the sounds called for by the score.

When we choose to know Joy and Peace, by believing in and following Jesus, we are transformed from drowning souls in a fallen world into instruments in the hands of the living God. The type of instrument we become depends upon God's plan and purpose for our lives. On the surface, we might look like a beat up pair of rusty spoons, or maybe a beautifully carved and finished piece of craftsmanship. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter. Not even one tiny bit. The *look* of the instrument is not what counts. What counts is the *sound* it makes, and its *appropriateness* for the music being made.

In the same way, it does not matter one tiny bit how we look. What is important is the sound we choose to make. Will we remain a part of noise and clamor of a selfish world, or will we choose to become a part of the music created by the love of a selfless follower of Christ?

In deciding to follow Jesus, we choose to become God's instrument and take part in His music. Our part might be to provide the beat in a bluegrass number. Or it might be to provide the solo in a symphonic work. We don't control which piece we contribute to or which part we play. That is up to the One who creates both the music and the music makers. Nor is that our concern. Every good piece of music serves an equally vital purpose, and expresses an equally truthful part of what it is to be alive, and every instrument when played with precision and passion is invaluable to the music. The style of music and the part played are not what matters. What matters is that the composition is good, and the composition is played well.

God is the ultimate artist. As a writer, His compositions express every emotion ever felt. As a player, He has mastered every instrument and every style. And as God

takes the stage to perform one of His masterworks, He selects exactly the right instrument to express exactly what is called for in that particular movement of that particular score.

As followers of Jesus, we are the instruments God takes in hand to play His themes throughout human history. All we are and all we experience come together to create within us a singular, irreplaceable voice, more rare and priceless than any Stradivarius, perfectly fashioned and perfectly tuned, to make the perfect sound at the perfect time in the perfect music.

Ephesians 2:10 “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Romans 6:11-14 “... count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus... do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires... rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. For sin shall no longer be your master...” (NIV)

2 Timothy 2:21 “Those who cleanse themselves... will be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.” (NIV)

AS GOD’S INSTRUMENTS, WE EXPERIENCE LIVES COMPOSED BY GOD AND PLAYED OUT IN THE WORLD.

The ultimate will of God for you.

God knows the decisions we will freely choose to make during our brief time on earth before we ever make them. He also knows His specific plan and vital purpose for our lives. And He knows how our individual lives weave through the great tapestry of human history – adding just the right color and texture – to complement and complete His great, glorious, and grand design.

With all this in mind, God fashions who we are (our minds and bodies, passions and aversions, abilities and disabilities) and places us within the timeline of human history (at just the right place and moment) so as we choose to follow Jesus, we are transformed into the exact instrument He requires to carry out His purpose at that specific time and place in history.

Then our lives become a music, composed by God and played out in the world, resulting in glory to God, light to the world, and for us, Joy “inexpressible” and Peace “surpassing comprehension.” This is the ultimate will of God for you, what God promises you will experience as you walk with Him through the journey of life.

Matthew 6:8 “... your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” (NIV)

1 John 3:20 “... for God... knows all things.” (NASB)

Isaiah 46:9-11 “... I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure... I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it.’ ” (NASB)

Acts 17:26 “From one man he (*God*) made all the nations... and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.” (NIV)

Romans 9:17 “For the Scripture says... ‘FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH.’ ” (NASB)

Ephesians 1:4-11 “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace... we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will,” (NIV)

Ephesians 5:2-20 “... walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God... For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord... Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil... speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (NIV)

Psalms 59:16,17 “But I will sing of your strength, in the morning I will sing of your love; for you are my fortress, my refuge in times of trouble. You are my strength, I sing praise to you; you, God, are my fortress, my God on whom I can rely.” (NIV)

Romans 15:13 “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him...” (NIV)

Being truly alive.

Walking with God, following Jesus, discovering God’s plan and purpose, fulfilling our destiny, knowing Joy and Peace – *this* is being truly alive. This is “life” as God originally conceived it for His children. It’s the “life that is truly life” and the “abundant life” mentioned in the verses below that God created us to experience and enjoy. Life is not indulging ourselves in the temporary distractions of the world in which we live. Life is *transcending* the world in which we live, rising above its inevitable heartache and pain, and receiving the inevitable grace and blessing our holy, loving God so desperately wants to pour out upon His children.

1 Timothy 6:17-19 “Command (*them*)... to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will

lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.” (NIV)

John 10:10 “... I (*Jesus*) came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (NASB)

In a sense, this is the “life” Adam and Eve originally enjoyed in the Garden of Eden that was lost when sin entered the world. The world fell when Adam sinned, and it has not recovered since. Death, disease, war, famine, crime – it all has its origins in the fall of man. But through God’s plan of grace, we can regain this “life” for which we were created, and enjoy it despite the fall – in fact, in the very midst of a fallen world.

Romans 5:12-21 “... through one man (*Adam*) sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men... But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many... For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous... where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 15:22 “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.” (NASB)

Adam and Eve were born into a *perfect* world, but could (and did) *lose* their relationship with God, their eternal life, by *one bad decision* to sin. We are born into a *fallen* world, but we can *gain* a relationship with God, our eternal life, by *one good decision* to receive Jesus as Savior. In the Garden, we had it all, and threw it all away. In a fallen world, we have nothing, but can get it all back, if we will put our faith in Jesus and follow Him.

John 3:16,36 “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life... He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.” (NASB)

Many times, we envy the life Adam and Eve knew in the Garden. But let’s face it; we all would have eventually fallen as well. We should therefore embrace the “grace in which we now stand,” and in it find the hope and strength we need to rise up from the fallen world and walk hand-in-hand with our holy, loving Heavenly Father, knowing the Joy, Peace, and life He desires for us.

Romans 5:1-5 “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts...” (NIV)

Psalm 145:8-16 “The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made... The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does. The LORD upholds all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down... You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.” (NIV)

Psalm 73:1-28 “Surely God is good to... those who are pure in heart!... I am continually with You; You have taken hold of my right hand. With Your counsel You will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever... as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all Your works.” (NASB)

Psalm 37:3-34 “Trust in the LORD and do good... delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart... trust in him and he... will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn... The LORD makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him; though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand... Hope in the LORD and keep his way. He will exalt you...” (NIV)

1 Peter 5:6 “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up...” (NIV)

Truly fulfilled and truly fulfilling.

When we choose to put our faith in Jesus and then follow Him, we are transformed into instruments that are useful to God in performing the score of human history. As this transformation takes place, God smiles, reaches over, takes us from the stand, and includes our unique voice in His music. God is the composer. We are the instruments. And our lives become an integral part of His great composition.

In playing our part in the plan of God, two things occur:

- ❖ We are truly fulfilled; and
- ❖ We truly fulfill our calling.

As instruments in the hands of the living God, we experience lives *composed by God* to perfectly complement who we are and what we are called to do in His plan. No matter what part we are chosen to play, our part is perfectly suited for our unique voice, and our part is also perfectly suited for the composition. Everything we are,

and everything we experience, come together to fashion us into the perfect instrument for the part we are called to play. No one else could ever perform our part the way we can. This includes not only our strengths and victories, but also our weaknesses and failures, and even the disasters and injustices that befall us. God uses all of these things in a way that only He understands to shape and train our voices, so when it is time for us to sing in His music, we do so with divinely inspired artistry and power.

Romans 8:28 “... God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” (NASB)

Isaiah 43:1-5 “But now, this is what the LORD says – he who created you... he who formed you... ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior... Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you... Do not be afraid, for I am with you...’ ” (NIV)

Isaiah 48:17 “This is what the LORD says – your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: ‘I am the LORD your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go.’ ” (NIV)

Psalms 63:1-7 “You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water... Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands. I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you... Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings.” (NIV)

Psalms 28:1-7 “To you, LORD, I call; you are my Rock... Praise be to the LORD, for he has heard my cry for mercy. The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and he helps me. My heart leaps for joy, and with my song I praise him.” (NIV)

In playing our part, we are truly fulfilled. We come to understand in some fashion why God made us the way He did, and why God allowed certain things to happen in our lives. Most likely, this knowledge will not come at the beginning of our part in the music. But at some point, even if it is not until the closing bars, God will reveal His purpose, and then we will understand and we will be grateful God chose the methods He did to fashion us into the men and women we have become. And throughout the journey, we will know a true sense of fulfillment, a Joy and Peace, which comes only from taking part in the music of God.

Psalms 145:18,19 “The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desires of those who fear him...” (NIV)

Psalms 139:1-16 “... LORD... you know me... For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made... Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days

ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”
(NIV)

Romans 12:3-18 “Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly... Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality... If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.” (NASB)

Psalms 107:2-43 “Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story... they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way... Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind, for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things... they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness, the utter darkness, and broke away their chains. Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds... tell of his works with songs of joy... Let the one who is wise heed these things and ponder the loving deeds of the LORD.” (NIV)

Isaiah 60:1-9 “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you... Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy... to the honor of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor.” (NIV)

Jude 1:24,25 “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.” (NASB)

In playing our part, we also truly fulfill our calling. We do what we are created to do in God’s plan. We accomplish His purpose for our particular instrument in His great composition. We fulfill our individual destinies, as parts of the greater destiny of all humanity.

Psalms 16:11 “You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.” (NIV)

Ephesians 2:10 “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Isaiah 58:11-14 “The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail... not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance...” (NIV)

Philippians 2:13 “for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.” (NIV)

We have to be very careful in passing judgment as to whether we or another person are fulfilling the purposes of God. God's idea of fulfilling a purpose and the world's idea can be very different. The world equates fulfilling to *fame and victory*. God equates fulfilling to *effort and motivation*.

For example, in the world's eyes, to fulfill a calling to play football is to play quarterback and win the Super Bowl. You ignore an education, sacrifice relationships, take performance enhancing drugs, and do whatever it takes to start and win.

In God's eyes, to fulfill a calling to play football is to work hard, play fair, and maintain a holy character all the while. It doesn't matter one bit if you start or win. What matters is that people see Jesus in you, starting or sitting on the bench, winning the Super Bowl or coming in last in the league.

God's plan for your life might not be to lead a team to the Super Bowl. It might be to serve as a beacon of light, washing towels in the locker room of a small town gym. In God's eyes, those who do whatever He calls them to do with honesty and integrity are equally important, and equally prepared to know Joy and Peace.

The apostle Paul's life is a great example. There was a time in Paul's missionary journeys when he was kicked out of every town he went to, and for his troubles he was often severely beaten, sometimes nearly to death, on the way out. From a human perspective, his missionary efforts were a dismal failure. Almost no one was converted. Nearly everyone hated him. And Paul's very life was in constant danger. See Acts 9 & 13-28.

2 Corinthians 11:1-30 "I (Paul) hope you will put up with me in a little foolishness... I have worked much harder (than the false teachers among the Corinthians), been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness." (NIV)

But from God's perspective, Paul was doing spectacularly well! The Gospel was spreading quickly and being communicated with great passion. A man was willing to

be repeatedly beaten nearly to death for the chance to share a message. People will listen, if only out of curiosity, to a man like that. If Paul had been welcomed in every town he went to, he might have stayed in one place for years, and the Gospel would have remained there with him. By being driven from town to town, the message of Christ was traveling along with the broken and bleeding man.

This was Paul's purpose, not to win the day, but to be the first. Then it was the purpose of other men to come in and water the seeds Paul planted and reap the harvest. Everyone had their own part to play, and in doing so, fulfilled their unique calling with their equally unique voice, granted to them as an instrument fashioned by the hands of the living God.

1 Corinthians 3:1-23 “**Brothers and sisters, I (Paul) could not address you** *(the people of Corinth, one of the cities Paul visited on his missionary journeys)* **as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly – mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? For when one says, ‘I follow Paul,’ and another, ‘I follow Apollos** *(a minister who came to Corinth after Paul’s initial visit),* **’ are you not mere human beings? What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe – as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. For we are co-workers in God’s service; you are God’s field, God’s building. By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care... Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become ‘fools’ so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight. As it is written: ‘He catches the wise in their craftiness;’ and again, ‘The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile.’ So then, no more boasting about human leaders! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.”** (NIV)

Effort, motivation, and results.

In fulfilling our destiny, we are not responsible for “results;” that is, some kind of measurable outcome. We are responsible for two things: Our *effort* and our *motivation*.

God wants us, like Paul, to work very hard at our calling. We are not to become distracted by the material things of the world or discouraged by the injustices and

hardships of the world. We are to persevere and keep going, no matter what. This is our “effort.”

Romans 12:1-18 “Therefore I (*Paul*) urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect... Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly... Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality... If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.” (NASB)

2 Peter 1:3-10 “... His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him... Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ... Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble;” (NASB)

Hebrews 10:22-36 “let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings... Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful... Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.” (NIV)

Habakkuk 3:17-19 “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength...” (NIV)

God also wants us, like Paul, to work very hard at our calling *for the right reasons*. This is our “motivation,” which is *extremely* important to God. There are lots of people out there doing very admirable things for very unadmirable reasons. That doesn’t cut it with God. He wants us to do the right thing for the right reason. When our

motivations are impure, God can still use our actions for good, but we will never gain from our improperly motivated deeds the Joy and Peace we ultimately seek.

Romans 12:9 “Love must be sincere...” (NIV)

1 Timothy 1:5 “But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” (NASB)

Galatians 4:18 “It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good...” (NIV)

Proverbs 16:2 “All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, but the LORD weighs the motives.” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 4:5 “... the Lord... will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts; and then each man’s praise will come to him from God.” (NASB)

1 Samuel 16:7 “... for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” (NASB)

Luke 16:15 “He (*Jesus*) said to them (*the Pharisees*), ‘You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God’s sight.’ ” (NIV)

Luke 18:9-14 “And He (*Jesus*) also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: ‘Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: “God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.” But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner!” I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.’ ” (NASB)

Luke 21:1-4 “As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. ‘Truly I tell you,’ he said, ‘this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.’ ” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 13:3 “And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor... but do not have love, it profits me nothing.” (NASB)

Matthew 6:1-6 “Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your

door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.” (NASB)

Philippians 1:15-18 “It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so out of love... The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition... But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I (*Paul*) rejoice...” (NIV)

Isaiah 55:10,11 “As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” (NIV)

Joel 2:13 “Rend your heart and not your garments...” (NIV)

We are responsible for our effort and our motivation, and God is responsible for the results. Notice it’s not the other way around. Sometimes, we want to take responsibility for the results, and rely on God to zap us with unlimited energy and unquestionable motivations. That’s not the way it works! We must choose to persevere, especially when life becomes dark and difficult, and we must choose to persevere for the right reasons. Then God can do with our effort and motivation what is appropriate in His plan.

Galatians 5:6 “... The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” (NIV)

Just as with Paul’s missionary journeys, we should never try to measure success as the world sees it. We must measure success as God sees it, based on the consistency and intensity of our efforts and the purity of our motives. A huge success in the world’s eyes can be a dismal failure to God, and a dismal failure in the world’s eyes can be a tremendous victory to God. Noah and Jonah are examples of this.

Noah and Jonah.

Noah is perhaps the greatest evangelist who ever lived. The story of Noah goes something like this... After the fall of Adam and Eve, the population grew and as time went by, mankind became more and more evil, until it was totally and utterly depraved. The Bible describes the heart of mankind as inclined to “only evil all the time,” such that the earth was “filled with violence” (Genesis 6:5,13). Finally, there was literally only one righteous man on the entire planet: Noah. So God decided to send a world-wide flood to destroy all of the evil and start over with only Noah and his immediate family.

God told Noah to build a boat big enough to hold his family (8 people) and two of every animal on the planet. Noah did, and it took him about 100 years.* Now the thing is that it had never rained before, and there was Noah building this colossal boat in the middle of dry land for 100 years. He had to go out, get supplies, and work on this thing every day, and when the unspeakably evil, decadent people of the time asked him what on earth he was doing, he told them the truth. How they must have laughed! How they must have ridiculed him! And not for a day, or a week, or a year, but for a century!

Yet Noah was faithful, and that makes him one choice for the greatest evangelist of all time. He evangelized everyone he came into contact with, through both his words and his deeds, for 100 years. And how many converts did he have? *Zero! Zilch! Nada!*

Now let's look at Jonah, perhaps the worst evangelist in all of history. Jonah was an Old Testament prophet, and he absolutely hated the people of Nineveh (a powerful and very evil city-state), who were the sworn enemies of Israel. So whom did God call Jonah to evangelize? The Ninevites of course!

And what did Jonah do? He tried to run from God. He went in the opposite direction of Nineveh, and it wasn't until God got Jonah's attention with the help of one really big fish that Jonah finally went to the city of his calling.

What did Jonah do there? He walked through the city one time saying: "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4). This basically translates to: "You are going to get it and soon!" Then Jonah found a comfortable seat well outside the city and eagerly waited to see Nineveh destroyed.

How many converts did Jonah have? *The entire city!* Everyone from the King to the window washer repented, and God mercifully spared the city. Was Jonah happy? Was he excited about his great success? No! He was furious about it, and wished that he was dead! (Jonah 4:1-3).

These two great stories remind us that, in serving God, we are not playing a numbers game. Success is not measured by the world's yardstick. Our success in fulfilling the plan of God for our lives is measured by our effort and our motivation. God determines the results according to His gracious plan. Like Noah, in the world's eyes we might totally fail, but in God's eyes we have performed superbly and accomplished exactly what we were created to do. And like Jonah, in the world's eyes we might have a great success, and we might also actually accomplish something

* People lived much longer in ancient times before the flood. But that, as they say, is another story and beyond the scope of this work.

legitimately wonderful, but in God's eyes we are not the man or woman He longs for us to be, because our hearts do not belong to Him.

Isaiah 29:13 “The Lord says: ‘These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me...’ ” (NIV)

1 Chronicles 28:9 “... serve Him with a whole heart and a willing mind; for the LORD searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will reject you...” (NASB)

The most difficult questions in all of life.

The stories of Noah and Jonah are springboards into some of the most difficult questions in all of life.

The Bible says that Noah “was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God” (Genesis 6:9). So there is little doubt that Noah knew the Joy “inexpressible” and Peace “surpassing comprehension” we have been studying. But there is also little doubt that his life was far from easy. The time he lived in, and the people he was surrounded by, were perhaps the worst in all of history. It could not have been a pleasant life, and we all know from our own experiences that there are good men, women, and children in the world whose lives are unfortunately very difficult.

Jonah said about himself: “It would be better for me to die than to live” (Jonah 4:8). This indicates Jonah was a deeply troubled and flawed man who was rejecting God's will for his life. Yet God chose him to do wonderful things. We also see people who are simply evil, enjoying every material thing this world has to offer. It is only natural to ask ourselves: *Why do good people sometimes suffer, and bad people sometimes prosper?*

As instruments in the hands of the living God, we experience lives composed by God *played out in the world*. Not in heaven. In the world. The fallen world. The world where mankind's freewill is truly free and will not be taken away until the tale of human history is complete. Evil is the unavoidable and inevitable result of freewill, and accordingly sometimes things are going to seem senseless, and sometimes things are going to be horrible beyond imagining.

Why good people sometimes suffer.

We have already spent a fair deal of time with this question in Chapter 6, where we saw how God uses suffering as a means to help us grow and serve Him. There is suffering we deserve (resulting from our own bad decisions and from God's discipline) that corrects us when we go astray. There is also suffering we do *not*

deserve (in the forms of Spiritual Testing and Spiritual Service), whereby we first grow and then serve the Lord.

As part of all of this, there are also men and women, and indeed boys and girls, who endure particularly difficult and heartrending trials. Sometimes, very bad things happen to very good people, even innocent children. And if it happens to you (or to someone you love), one of the most vexing and potentially devastating questions in all of life can be: Why did God allow this to happen to me? This question deserves an answer.

It should first be acknowledged that, at the end of the day, no one can really answer this question for another person. It is something each individual must, with God's help, come to terms with on his or her own. But a possible answer is this:

God sometimes allows a terrible thing to happen because, when you choose to trust Him despite indescribable hurt, you gain a certain wisdom and compassion that can come no other way. This wisdom and compassion is something exceedingly precious, which only you can then in turn share with others who have experienced similar hurts. In doing so, you are able to serve our Lord in a way very few people in all of history ever could, and at the same time come to know a quality of Joy and Peace very few others will ever know, and that you never would have known had you not experienced the suffering in the first place. And one day you will discover that the rewards for such faithfulness are beyond description.

God calls certain very special people to endure very special suffering as part of His plan for human history. But He also provides very special grace to endure, overcome, and serve. God uses the unique suffering these men and women (and boys and girls) experience to prepare them for a unique service to someone they will encounter in their lives, and this service could never have been accomplished had they not first experienced the pain.

There are certain injuries in this life that can only be soothed by someone who has gone through the same thing (or a different hurt but of similar magnitude), and God sometimes uses the terrible injustices of this world to prepare certain very special servants for this difficult task. But these servants also experience an exceptionally rare satisfaction that comes from being the minister of God's grace to a deeply wounded soul, and in time, God bestows upon them rewards for faithfulness commensurate with the severity of their unique suffering that are indescribable.

2 Corinthians 1:3-5 "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we

ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.” (NIV)

Isaiah 57:15-18 “For this is what the high and exalted One says – he who lives forever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite... I will heal them; I will guide them and restore comfort...’ ” (NIV)

Psalms 62:1-12 “My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken... Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken. My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge... One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong, and that you, O Lord, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

1 Corinthians 2:9 “but just as it is written, ‘THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.’ ” (NASB)

Isaiah 49:23 “... those who hope in me (*God*) will not be disappointed.” (NIV)

Psalms 13:5,6 “But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the LORD’s praise, for he has been good to me.” (NIV)

It’s rare for a painter or photographer to light their work from just one point. Instead, they light from many different angles in order to reveal their subject in all its subtle nuances.

This question of why good people sometimes suffer is a truly difficult subject. We will take a cue from the artisans out there and return to it several times in our study, considering it from different perspectives, seeking God’s light from diverse angles, to help us better understand things that have troubled mankind from the beginning.

Ecclesiastes 8:14 “There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: the righteous who get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked who get what the righteous deserve...” (NIV)

John 14:1-27 “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me (*Jesus*)... Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” (NIV)

Why bad people sometimes prosper.

This is also a subject we’ve touched upon throughout our study, but it deserves another look because this can be one of the most frustrating things in life. Many times we see the most undeserving people overflowing with good things, and if we don’t have some clear perspective on how and why this can be, it can become one of

the grievances we hold against God. Bad people do sometimes prosper, but they are emphatically not to be envied.

Psalm 73:1-28 “Surely God is good to... those who are pure in heart! But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling... For I was envious of the arrogant as I saw the prosperity of the wicked... They mock and wickedly speak of oppression... When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight until I came into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end. Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction... When my heart was embittered and I was pierced within, then I was senseless and ignorant. I was like a beast before You. Nevertheless I am continually with You; You have taken hold of my right hand. With Your counsel You will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. For, behold, those who are far from You will perish; You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to You. But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all Your works.” (NASB)

Why do bad people sometimes prosper? We live in a fallen world, and many times evil is rewarded instead of good. People have freewill, and some of them will choose to exploit the weak and sabotage the strong for their own gain.

Ecclesiastes 7:15-29 “In this meaningless life of mine I (*Solomon*) have seen both of these: the righteous perishing in their righteousness, and the wicked living long in their wickedness... So I turned my mind to understand, to investigate and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things... This only have I found: God made mankind upright, but they have gone in search of many schemes.” (NIV)

Psalm 10:2-7 “In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak, who are caught in the schemes he devises. He boasts of the cravings of his heart... In his pride... there is no room for God... His mouth is full of lies and threats; trouble and evil are under his tongue.” (NIV)

Proverbs 29:10 “The bloodthirsty hate a person of integrity and seek to kill the upright.” (NIV)

Habakkuk 1:4 “Therefore the law is ignored and justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore, justice comes out perverted.” (NASB)

Psalm 94:3-23 “How long shall the wicked exult... Pay heed, you senseless among the people; and when will you understand, stupid ones? He who planted the ear, does He not hear? He who formed the eye, does He not see?... will He not rebuke, even He who teaches man knowledge?... Blessed is the man whom You chasten, O LORD, and whom You teach out of Your law; that You may grant him relief from the days of adversity, until a pit is dug for the wicked. For the LORD will not abandon His people... Your lovingkindness, O LORD, will hold me up. When my anxious thoughts multiply within me, Your consolations delight my soul... They band themselves together against the life

of the righteous and condemn the innocent to death. But the LORD has been my stronghold, and my God the rock of my refuge. He has brought back their wickedness upon them and will destroy them in their evil; the LORD our God will destroy them.” (NASB)

Psalm 37:12-15 “The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes at him with his teeth. The Lord laughs at him, for He sees his day is coming... Their sword will enter their own heart...” (NASB)

How can God allow this? Because the only way to prevent it is to take freewill away from His creation, which He will not do. If He did, there would be no point to human history. We would all join a horde of robots, unable to have a true, loving relationship with our Creator, simply preprogrammed to do (or not do) His bidding. That is a life bereft of meaning and purpose. We are here to make choices, for good or evil, and this ensures that sometimes bad people will prosper.

So instead of forbidding evil, God incorporates evil into His plan for the ages (without ever sanctioning, endorsing, or causing it), by using it as a means to test His children so we can grow up and serve Him. Then by freely choosing to trust God, we demonstrate to the world the matchless ability of God’s grace to sustain us in perfect Joy and Peace, even in the greatest of trials.

Proverbs 16:4-20 “The LORD works out everything to its proper end – even the wicked for a day of disaster. The LORD detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished... blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD.” (NIV)

Genesis 50:20 “... you (*the brothers of Joseph*) meant evil against me (*Joseph*), but God meant it for good...” (NASB)

Ecclesiastes 3:16-18 “And I (*Solomon*) saw something else under the sun: In the place of judgment – wickedness was there, in the place of justice – wickedness was there. I said to myself, ‘God will bring into judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed.’ I also said to myself, ‘As for humans, God tests them...’” (NIV)

James 1:2-4 “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (NASB)

What, then, should be our attitude towards those who gain by doing evil? Pity. Great pity. Why? Because God’s Word assures us that, when it’s all said and done, and the dust settles, and all the cards are on the table...

We all get what we ask for (part 1).

God is fair, and God is just. He allows freewill to run its course in a fallen world, but as the scriptures say, “God is not mocked.” He ensures that ultimately those who

follow Jesus get what they ask for: His grace and blessing. And those who reject Him get what they ask for: Nothing.

Galatians 6:7 “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap.” (NASB)

For those who reject Jesus and pursue the distractions of the world, there are two principles that will guide their destinies:

- ❖ They have their reward in full; and
- ❖ They have gained the world, but forfeited their souls.

Matthew 6:1-6 “Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I (*Jesus*) say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.” (NASB)

Mark 8:36 “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?” (NASB)

To “have your reward in full.”

The first principle is that those who sacrifice their integrity to gain some material thing “have their reward in full.” That’s it. There’s nothing else to come, so they better enjoy it. But in truth (and this is very important) they can’t enjoy it, because what they perceive as great reward is in reality nothing, only a temporary distraction that in time will wear off and leave them twice as needy and frustrated as before. They will as a result of their dishonor possess the thing, but the Joy and Peace that is our true desire will elude them, and in time they will come to the inescapable conclusion that all their power, wealth, fame, and other indulgences are nothing.

Job 20:4-8 “Surely you know how it has been from of old, ever since mankind was placed on the earth, that the mirth of the wicked is brief, the joy of the godless lasts but a moment. Though the pride of the godless person reaches to the heavens and his head touches the clouds, he will perish forever, like his own dung; those who have seen him will say, ‘Where is he?’ Like a dream he flies away, no more to be found, banished like a vision of the night.” (NIV)

Proverbs 11:7 “When a wicked man dies, his hope perishes; all he expected from his power comes to nothing.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Revelation 3:17 “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.” (NIV)

The statement in Matthew 6 that they “have their reward in full” is in fact bursting with irony, because what is seen by the subject as great reward is in truth no reward at all. Jesus is saying: “They have their reward in full, which is a great big double helping of nothing.”

Solomon is a fascinating person from the Bible who is a perfect case study for this principle. Solomon was quite likely the most wealthy, blessed person of all time.

2 Chronicles 1:12 “... wisdom and knowledge will be given you (*Solomon*). And I (*God*) will also give you wealth, riches and honor, such as no king who was before you ever had and none after you will have.” (NIV)

Solomon had unimaginable wealth, power, physical beauty, intellectual genius, respect of his peers, peace with his enemies, and one thousand wives and concubines from the most beautiful women in all the world (1 Kings 10:1-29; 2 Chronicles 1:11-17). And in all this, Solomon was absolutely miserable.

Solomon drank more deeply from the temporary distractions this world has to offer than any other person recorded in the Word of God. He tasted every indulgence, and with every bite he became more and more desperate and alone. Then he wrote the book of Ecclesiastes that chronicles his unsuccessful attempts to find Joy and Peace in the things of the world. He concludes that all he had was “vanity and striving after wind.”

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 “I (*Solomon*) said to myself, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself.’ And behold, it too was futility... I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; I made gardens and parks for myself, and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees... I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. Also, I collected for myself silver and gold, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself... the pleasures of men – many concubines. Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem... And all that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure... I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.” (NASB)

To “gain the world and forfeit your soul.”

“And there was no profit under the sun.” This leads to our second principle: What does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? (Mark 8:36.) The answer is: Nothing. There is no profit or reward in conquering the whole world, because in order to do so, you must first forfeit your soul. You must compromise the holy character you are called to develop by the voice of God as a follower of Christ in order to gain the world, and the result is a forfeiture of your very soul, the one thing you possess that is of any value. There is no repository for Joy and Peace, because the evil and compromise required to gain the world destroys the human soul and leaves us soulless, with only an empty place inside, frustrated and unfulfilled.

Isaiah 57:20,21 “But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. ‘There is no peace,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked.’” (NIV)

Isaiah 59:8 “... They have made their paths crooked, whoever treads on them does not know peace.” (NASB)

Job 15:20-26 “... the wicked man suffers torment... Distress and anguish fill him with terror; troubles overwhelm him... because he shakes his fist at God and vaunts himself against the Almighty, defiantly charging against him...” (NIV)

1 John 2:15-17 “Do not love the world or anything in the world... For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

The first principle was ironic. This second principle is an appeal to common sense. The cost of the world is the human soul, so anyone can see the prize is not worth the price. To put it in financial terms: To gain the world is cost prohibitive.

Heaven and Hell.

These principles also relate to our eternal destination. We feel the voice of God calling to us in our hearts. We are then presented with a choice, to heed the voice and follow it to God or to reject the voice and pursue a path of our own choosing.

If we choose to heed the voice, we are led to a Savior who provides us with both eternal salvation and a path to temporal Joy and Peace. We put our faith in Jesus (for our eternal salvation) and we follow Jesus (to discover and fulfill His plan for our lives and find the Joy and Peace for which we long). Our Savior leads us by the hand down the path of life of His choosing, and then when it is our time to die and stand before our Heavenly Father, Jesus never lets go. He just hangs on and takes us by the hand through the doors of death and then stands by our side with us before the Father.

Psalms 73:23-28 “... You have taken hold of my right hand. With Your counsel You will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but

You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever... as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge..." (NASB)

1 John 2:1 "... if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;" (NASB)

John 10:28,29 "I (*Jesus*) give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand." (NIV)

And because of who Jesus is and what He did on the cross, our sins are not held against us (since Jesus paid for them) and we do not fall short of the glory of God (since we received the righteousness of Jesus at salvation – see the *Two Extraordinary Things* section of Chapter 3). And so we are welcomed into God's kingdom because Jesus our Savior is standing by our side, and then the party starts that includes rewards for faithfulness that are beyond our ability to comprehend. Lots more on this in the Coda.

1 Corinthians 2:9 "but just as it is written, 'THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.'" (NASB)

Revelation 7:17 "for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes." (NASB)

If we choose to reject the voice of God that calls to each of us, we lead ourselves down a path that takes us into the depths of the fallen world. There we pursue worldly rewards, and in so doing, forfeit our souls. We reject the grace of God, and choose instead to go it on our own and take what we can get in a fallen world. But ultimately the world's rewards are meaningless, and their cost is everything.

Romans 1:18-32 "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man... Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions... receiving in their own persons the

due penalty of their error. And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness... and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.” (NASB)

Ephesians 4:18,19 “They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Then we die. And just as we went through the journey of life alone, now we must go through the journey of death alone. We stand before the Father, not with a Savior by our side, but by ourselves, with the burden of explaining why we deserve to spend eternity in God’s kingdom.

Interestingly, it does not seem to be sin that condemns the unbelieving after their death. Jesus paid for every sin ever committed by every person who has ever or will ever live, so sin is not the issue. The issue is: We all fall short of the glory of God. We can’t earn our salvation. No one is good enough to deserve heaven, and so the only alternative is hell.

Isaiah 64:6 “... all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment...” (NASB)

Psalms 143:2 “... for in Your sight no man living is righteous.” (NASB)

1 Peter 3:18 “For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God...” (NASB)

Romans 5:1-8 “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand... You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (NIV)

1 John 2:2 “He (*Jesus*) is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 5:15 “And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.” (NIV)

Revelation 20:11-14 “Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it... And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds (*that is, good works*)... And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life (*from accepting Christ as Savior*), he was thrown into the lake of fire.” (NASB)

We have not looked at the subject of hell at all so far in this study, because our purpose is to focus on the gospel of Jesus. “Gospel” means “good news,” and to say there is a lot of good news about Jesus is the greatest understatement imaginable. But we should also take a moment and look at the eternal consequences of rejecting Jesus as Savior.

The unbeliever stands before God alone. Sin is not the issue, because Jesus paid for sin. But the unbeliever undeniably falls short of the glory of God. He or she did not receive the righteousness of Christ as a free gift at the point of salvation. The only righteousness they have is their own, and their righteousness cannot compare to the righteousness of the One who created the heavens and the earth.

Romans 3:10-23 “As it is written: ‘There is no one righteous, not even one... All have turned away...’ Now we know that whatever the law (*the Old Testament law, which was very strict*) says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” (NIV)

Psalms 8:1-4 “O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth, who have displayed Your splendor above the heavens!... When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained; what is man...?” (NASB)

Isaiah 55:8,9 “ ‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the LORD. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’ ” (NIV)

At the heart of the unbeliever’s decision to reject the voice of God that called to them from birth is a pride at the very core of their being that says: I’m not going to follow God’s voice because I do not wish to submit to His will, at least not to all of it. I’ll do good as dictated by my own sense of right and wrong, and that should be enough. I don’t want a Savior, nor do I need to be saved. I can and will live my life according to my own moral compass, as the master of my own life, and I’ll provide for myself in this world. Then when I die, everything will be all right because the good I have done during my life should be enough to satisfy whatever awaits me after death, if there is anything at all.

The center of it is this: We think our good works will be good enough to satisfy God. We conclude that, while God may or may not have His way of doing things, my way should be sufficient no matter what, because I have lived what I consider to be a good life. And that should count for something whether it was the Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Taoists, Shintoists, Zoroastrians, or somebody else who figured out this crazy life.

The arrogance here is that we consider our good works to be sufficient to earn the approval of God. We expect the God who created the heavens and the earth to be sufficiently impressed with the life we have led to pat us on the back and welcome us into His kingdom. The prideful heart might never admit this, but that is tantamount to believing we are somehow God's equals. Maybe not exactly His true equal, but we're in the same ballpark, and we should be in heaven not as a *gift*, but as a *right*, because we *earned* it. And who needs a Savior when you can save yourself?

The unbeliever who reads that might reject it with every fiber of their being. They might say, "I would never consider myself equal with God, and I'm not saying that I deserve anything. It just seems that if I do my best and lead a good life, God should let me in. It should be enough, if He truly loves me."

But if we look at this line of reasoning closely, underneath fair words it says this: I did my best and that should be enough, regardless of who Jesus was or what He did on the cross. I don't need Him. I did what I needed to do on my own. I should therefore get into heaven. I've earned it. I deserve it. It's my right as a good person. And if God doesn't give it to me, then there is something wrong with God, not me. He must not be truly loving.

What this does is shift all the glory and honor to the unbeliever, who did their best and is now entitled to heaven, and contest the love of God, making Him out to be the bad guy if He is not willing bow to the good works of the unbeliever and grant him or her heaven as their right. It transfers all the credit to the unbeliever, and all the debt to God.

As we saw before, this way of thinking has its roots in a low opinion of God and a high opinion of ourselves. We think God's holiness is relative, rather than absolute, something that can be appeased by our best efforts, because after all He loves us, and it just seems that if we try our best somehow we should be able to work this all out without the need for some kind of Savior.

But, as we have seen over and over in this work, that is emphatically not how God describes Himself in His Word. He describes Himself as absolutely and infinitely holy, a being that utterly rejects our sin, and whose righteousness is infinitely incomparable. And so our salvation could never be earned. It must come as a gift.

Revelation 15:4 "Who will not fear you, Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy..." (NIV)

1 Samuel 2:2 "There is no one holy like the LORD..." (NIV)

Habakkuk 1:12,13 "LORD... My God, my Holy One... Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing." (NIV)

1 John 1:5 "... God is light; in him there is no darkness at all." (NIV)

Isaiah 1:13-18 “I (*God*) cannot endure iniquity... your sins are as scarlet... they are red like crimson...” (NASB)

Proverbs 3:32 “For the devious are an abomination to the LORD...” (NASB)

Romans 1:18 “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men...” (NASB)

Isaiah 59:2 “But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear.” (NASB)

1 Samuel 6:20 “... Who can stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God?...” (NIV)

So the unbeliever might say: “Alright, alright, so it’s a gift. Then just give it to me! But why does this Jesus have to be involved? Why some sort of barbaric, bloody sacrifice? Why not just a straight out gift, with no strings attached?”

The answer is: Because God does not sweep things under the rug and pretend they never happened. There is a price to be paid for sin, and someone has to pay for it. His holiness must be appeased, or He is not truly holy. He is something less. And His absolute, infinite holiness must be satisfied, not by good works that fall short, but rather by a perfect sacrifice that truly atones for the sins of the world.

We, of course, could never do that. And so, because God loves us, He became a man, Jesus, and paid that price Himself. He did for us what we could never do for ourselves. He redeemed every sin ever committed by every person who has ever or will ever live. And He promises to give us a righteousness before God, not as a result of works, but as a gift of grace. Now all that remains is for the gift to be received.

2 Corinthians 5:18,19 “Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ... God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them...” (NASB)

Colossians 1:19-20 “For God was pleased... through him (*Jesus*) to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” (NIV)

Romans 5:1-5 “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God... and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts...” (NASB)

1 Peter 3:18 “For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God...” (NASB)

1 John 2:2 “He (*Jesus*) is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 5:18,19 “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ... not counting people’s sins against them...” (NIV)

Romans 5:17-21 “... those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!...”

through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous... where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 5:21 “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf (*our sin is imputed to Jesus*), so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (*Jesus’ righteousness is imputed to us*).” (NASB)

1 Peter 2:24 “And He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin (*sin is taken away*) and live to righteousness (*righteousness is received*); for by His wounds you were healed.” (NASB)

Philippians 3:8-10 “More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord... so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection...” (NASB)

Colossians 2:13,14 “... He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.” (NASB)

1 John 1:7 “... the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.” (NIV)

And here is where prideful hearts go wrong. They just won’t receive it. Why? Because if they did, then they owe someone. They must recognize there is someone greater than themselves, to whom they owe their allegiance. They are no longer master. They have someone to serve.

And a heart full of pride just won’t do that. It won’t serve another, only itself. Jesus is the “string attached” to the gift of salvation, which arrogance cannot accept. And so we go out into the world and do our best. We reject the gift, and work towards the prize. We go it alone, and eventually head into eternity equally alone with a measure of good works that God’s Word unequivocally declares will utterly fall short.

The eternal ramifications of these decisions are: God gives us what we ask for. We rejected the grace that would have been extended if we had followed the voice of God, and as a result we also missed out on the free gift of salvation through faith in Jesus. Now we stand before God alone, and because we rejected the Savior we fall short. Our entire life has been a reaffirmation of our choice to go it alone and provide for ourselves in the world, and so now we must go it alone and provide for ourselves in eternity.

Perhaps the best description of hell in the Bible is not one of fire and brimstone, but rather one found in the following verse:

2 Thessalonians 1:8,9 “... those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus... will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power,” (NASB)

It all comes down to this: *Heaven is where God is. Hell is where God isn't.* Hell is a place completely removed from God's presence and glory. It is therefore a place utterly devoid of all that is worthy and good – those things that can only come from God. This is worse than fire and brimstone could ever be. Fire and brimstone would be a blessed relief from a place without anything that is of God.

Yet this is exactly what unbelievers ask for, whether they realize it or not. They reject the grace of God and choose to go it alone and provide for themselves during their time on earth. The terrifying consequence of this decision is: They must then also go it alone and provide for themselves for all eternity in a place “away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.” They reject God and His grace during their lives, so they spend eternity separated from Him and all that He provides.

This is emphatically not the will of God. God wants everyone to be saved and receive the fullness of His grace. But the choice is ours, and the decisions we make will carry on into eternity.

1 Timothy 2:3,4 “... God our Savior... desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (NASB)

2 Peter 3:9 “The Lord is... patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.” (NASB)

John 6:40 “For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son, and believes in Him will have eternal life...” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 6:2 “... behold, now is ‘THE DAY OF SALVATION –’ ” (NASB)

Hebrews 4:7 “... just as has been said before, ‘TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS.’ ” (NASB)

Acts 16:31 “... Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved...” (NIV)

John 3:16-36 “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God... Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them.” (NIV)

2 Thessalonians 2:10 “... They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.” (NIV)

We all get what we ask for (part 2).

We all get what we ask for. For those who reject Christ, they get “their reward in full,” which ultimately amounts to nothing. And they “gain the world, and forfeit their souls.” They lose everything to gain nothing, both in this life and in eternity.

Proverbs 11:7 “When a wicked man dies, his hope perishes; all he expected from his power comes to nothing.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Psalm 1:4-6 “The wicked are... like chaff which the wind drives away... For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” (NASB)

What do those who follow Jesus get? For those who reject the world and pursue the things of God that will create lasting happiness, what can they expect to receive?

Two principles guide the destinies of those who follow Jesus:

- ❖ They have their reward (in this life) in part; and
- ❖ They forfeit the world, but complete their soul.

To “have your reward (in this life) in part.”

The first principle is that those who refuse to sacrifice their integrity to gain some material thing “have their reward (in this life) in part.” To understand what this means, let’s consider a few principles revealed in God’s Word:

To begin with, God’s Word unequivocally declares that God rewards those who seek Him.

Hebrews 11:6 “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (NIV)

Proverbs 22:4 “The reward of humility and the fear of the LORD are riches, honor and life.” (NIV)

However, we live out our lives in a fallen world, and sometimes it is not God’s plan to reward those who are faithful to Him immediately or in full in this life. This may be a part of our spiritual testing by which we grow. Or it may be a part of some injustice we suffer that is intended as a means of spiritual service. It all depends on what God is doing in our lives. The point is: Sometimes God waits to fully reward faithfulness.

1 Peter 5:6,7 “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.” (NIV)

Micah 7:7,8 “But as for me, I will watch expectantly for the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me... Though I fall I will rise; though I dwell in darkness, the LORD is a light for me.” (NASB)

Psalms 37:7-11 “Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him... for... the humble will... delight themselves in abundant prosperity.” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 4:17,18 “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (NIV)

How long does God wait? That is determined by the part you are called to play in His music. You might not wait at all. You might wait a month, or a year, or a decade. You might even have to wait for heaven.

At first, this can be disappointing and somewhat discouraging. It’s only natural for us to want to be rewarded for faithfulness immediately. But as we have seen over and over again, God’s ways are not our ways, and in truth it is *much* better to be rewarded in this life in part.

Why? Because we live out our lives in a fallen world. When we consider the immeasurable love God has for His children and the omnipotent power He has at His disposal to bless us, how can we expect God to fully reward us within the confines of this world? Take a moment and genuinely reflect on this. Do you really want all your reward now, in this life, in this body, in this place? Or do you want God to hold back a little (or a lot!), and surprise you when you come to meet Him face to face?

Ephesians 3:14-21 “For this reason, I (*Paul*) bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.” (NASB)

God only rewards us in part in this life because His plans for our blessing simply cannot be comprehended by our finite minds, in our mortal bodies, in this fallen world, nor can they be contained therein. God’s plans to bless and delight us are simply far too big for this world. And so as a result God has given us His

unbreakable promise that He will without fail bless us in this life in part, and in the next life finish the job over the span of all eternity.

Luke 6:22,23 “Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven...” (NIV)

Hebrews 6:10 “God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him...” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 2:9 “but just as it is written, ‘THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.’ ” (NASB)

To “forfeit the world and complete your soul.”

Now we know (and should be really excited that) God is going to reward us in part for our faithfulness in this life, and there is a lot to look forward to in the next. So let’s move on to the second principle: We forfeit the world, but complete our souls. It takes humility and faith to come to the conclusion that it is better to pursue Christ and be rewarded partially in this life, than to pursue the world and be rewarded in full. And for most of us, choosing to follow Jesus will at some point involve forfeiting opportunities to indulge ourselves in the things of the world.

To follow Jesus, we must be honest in business, faithful to our spouses, and shun the low road to fame and influence. We must also forgo the unhealthy distractions of the world, and in doing so make very real sacrifices. Many times we will make less money, be less famous, and wield less power; and there will be temptations to wonder what might have been had we been less true to our beliefs.

But we gain something else instead: A clean heart and a steadfast spirit – a soul that is pure and unstained by the world. We are truly satisfied. We are truly fulfilled. Our very soul is in essence: Complete. What could be more precious, and indeed, more rewarding?

Psalms 51:10-19 “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me... For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it... The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise... Then You will delight in righteous sacrifices...” (NASB)

1 Peter 3:4 “... the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit... is precious in the sight of God.” (NASB)

James 1:10-27 “... the rich man... like flowering grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away. Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord

has promised to those who love Him... Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow... But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves... one who looks intently at the perfect law... and abides in it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does... Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” (NIV)

James 1:2-4 “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (NASB)

John 15:9-11 “As the Father has loved me (*Jesus*), so have I loved you. Now remain in my love... I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” (NIV)

Instead of a crushed, crippled, and empty soul, our hearts are full of Joy and Peace. And we know this true sense of happiness regardless of what the world throws at us, whether life seems good, bad, or boring.

Isaiah 58:11-14 “The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail... not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance...” (NIV)

With a soul that is complete and the resulting Joy and Peace, being rewarded in part is not so bad. On the contrary, it is wonderful, because then we have the capacity to anticipate what is to come, the day we are finally “absent from the body and at home with the Lord” and can receive all God has prepared for us in all its fullness. Death is not something to fear, but instead something that, in a healthy way, we can look forward to with eager anticipation. And the confidence that we will one day be rewarded in heaven for our faithfulness will take the sting out of the injustices of this world, and provide us with a calm assurance that will bring us Joy and Peace in every circumstance.

2 Corinthians 5:1-10 “For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven... we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. Therefore we

also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.” (NASB)

Hebrews 10:22-36 “let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings... Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful... Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.” (NIV)

Ephesians 1:18,19 “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe...” (NASB)

1 Thessalonians 5:23 “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (NASB)

Isaiah 49:23 “... those who hope in me (*God*) will not be disappointed.” (NIV)

We all get what we ask for. There is then no reason to be jealous of bad people who sometimes prosper. They are to be pitied. Their reward is a full measure of the nothingness of the world, at the price of their very souls. They gave up everything, to get nothing. This realization should create compassion within us, and make us more eager to share the good news of Jesus with a fallen world.

Psalms 37:1-11 “Do not fret because of evildoers, be not envious toward wrongdoers. For they will wither quickly like the grass and fade... Trust in the LORD and do good... Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He will do it. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light and your judgment as the noonday. Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him; do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, because of the man who carries out wicked schemes. Cease from anger and forsake wrath; do not fret; it leads only to evildoing. For evildoers will be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD, they will inherit the land. Yet a little while and the wicked man will be no more; and you will look carefully for his place and he will not be there. But the humble will inherit the land and will delight themselves in abundant prosperity.” (NASB)

Philemon 1:6 “I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

For those good people who sometimes suffer, there is every reason to be joyful. They are to be envied. Their reward is a partial measure of the immeasurable blessing of God, which they will one day enjoy in full, at the price of the nothingness of the world. They gave up nothing, to get everything! This realization should fill us with hope, and make us more eager to follow Jesus.

Philippians 3:8-10 “... I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord... so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings...” (NIV)

Romans 8:18 “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (NASB)

Acts 5:40-42 “... They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.” (NASB)

2 Timothy 4:7,8 “I (*Paul*) have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.” (NIV)

A composition both simple and complex.

In a sense, a great piece of music can be both utterly simple and exceedingly complex, all at the same time. It will carry profound themes that tie every note together to create a simple unified whole. It will also have subtle passages that can only be appreciated with intense concentration and repeated listening.

It's the same way with the composition of God and the way He uses us as His instruments within it. There are great and mighty themes in the Christian faith that are simple and direct and tie everything else together. There are also more demanding principles that account for the seemingly random and contradictory realities of life in a fallen world.

2 Corinthians 11:3-13 “But I (*Paul*) am afraid... your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached... or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully... such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.”

2 Peter 3:15-18 “Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His

letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction... But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.”

In taking all this in, God’s truths should be received like a great piece of music. As we listen, we must think and we must feel. And sometimes, we just have to sit back, let go, and let the music take us where it will.

Because...

TRUE LIFE IS ART, NOT SCIENCE.

To appreciate life, or whinge for magic decoder rings?

You don’t attend a concert the way you attend a science fair. (At least not if you expect to enjoy the music!) You approach the concert hall setting aside the thoughts and emotions of the day and any preconceived ideas about the piece you are about to hear, and you relax and let the music take you away.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, you approach the science fair with your slide rule in one hand and the periodic table of elements in the other, and you run like mad up and down the hall trying to learn something useful. It’s a totally different approach to two totally different things.

That’s because we *appreciate* art, and we *figure out* science. We can’t figure out art. If we could, it wouldn’t be art. There is something elusive and mysterious about true art, which is an integral part of its nature. Look at a masterwork by Michelangelo, Rubens, Seurat, or Van Gogh. The painting may tell a story, and it’s great fun trying to follow it from beginning to end. But it’s not really something to be figured out. It’s something to be appreciated.

In many ways, life in a fallen world is like that. It has elusive and mysterious qualities to it that are part of its very nature, and if you try to figure it all out, you are going to go nuts. Stop trying. As life takes you where God leads, don’t expect to understand every twist and turn. Appreciate them instead. Know God is in control, and He has a plan and purpose for your absolute good that in time will be revealed, even if that means in eternity. Then appreciate the hope this knowledge creates in your heart, and you will begin to know Joy and Peace.

Psalm 40:1-17 “I waited patiently for the LORD; and He inclined to me and heard my cry. He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay, and He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; many will see and fear and will trust

in the LORD. How blessed is the man who has made the LORD his trust, and has not turned to the proud, nor to those who lapse into falsehood... You, O LORD, will not withhold Your compassion from me; Your lovingkindness and Your truth will continually preserve me. For evils beyond number have surrounded me... Let all who seek You rejoice and be glad in You... You are my help and my deliverer..." (NASB)

If you try to figure out life in a fallen world and insist upon clarity and certainty every step of the way, you will without question fail, and in so doing become frustrated and angry. That's not Joy and Peace. That's a life devoid of faith. In fact, it's a life that refuses to exercise faith and selfishly demands instead a magic decoder ring for every conceivable ambiguity we encounter along our way.

This is not to say we should never look for answers in our lives. We should. What we have to appreciate is that answers will come, but not from applying the scientific method to the weights and measures of our thoughts and experiences. Answers will come from that still, small voice within us – the gentle whisper that is the Spirit of God – the way understanding of a great piece of art comes from appreciating it, rather than trying to decipher it.

Psalm 17:6-8 "I call on you, my God, for you will answer me... Show me the wonders of your great love... hide me in the shadow of your wings" (NIV)

Psalm 119:18-169 "Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things... I am a stranger on earth... My soul is consumed with longing...strengthen me according to your word... be gracious to me and teach me... Teach me knowledge and good judgment, for I trust your commands... may your unfailing love be my comfort... Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path... the unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple... I call with all my heart; answer me, LORD... May my cry come before you, LORD; give me understanding according to your word." (NIV)

Psalm 4:1-5 "Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness... Be gracious to me and hear my prayer... The LORD hears when I call to Him... and be still... and trust in the LORD." (NASB)

Psalm 37:1-24 "Do not fret because of those who are evil... Trust in the LORD and do good... Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your vindication like the noonday sun. Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him... The LORD makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him; though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand." (NIV)

Exhausted and incomplete, or exhilarated and full – Dancing through the seasons of life.

You can stand in front of a painting for hours, furrowing your brow and tugging at your beard, trying your best to figure it out, then walk away feeling exhausted and incomplete. Or you can stand there for hours, letting the figures and colors wash

over you, and then walk away with an appreciation for the work that leaves you exhilarated and full.

As we learn to appreciate the art of life, exhaustion is replaced with exhilaration. This is our Joy – the spark in our eyes and the spring in our step, the enthusiasm and passion for life – that comes only from following Jesus.

David is someone from the Bible who certainly knew this Joy. As we read about David's life, we see that he was a man of great passion. Sometimes his passions were misdirected, and they led him into terrible sin. But many times his passions were stirred by his faith, and David was willing to enthusiastically express the Joy that welled up within him. Read the Psalms, and you will hear echoes of the music David made before the Lord.

One of the great stories about David is how he danced before God. After David became king, he brought the Ark of the Covenant to his new home in Jerusalem, and as he did, he threw a big party to celebrate. As part of the festivities there was food, music, and Levitical sacrifices, and David danced throughout the streets of Jerusalem.

2 Samuel 6:12-19 “... So David went to bring up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with rejoicing. When those who were carrying the ark of the LORD had taken six steps, he sacrificed a bull and a fattened calf. Wearing a linen ephod, David was dancing before the LORD with all his might, while he and all Israel were bringing up the ark of the LORD with shouts and the sound of trumpets... They brought the ark of the LORD and set it in its place inside the tent that David had pitched for it, and David sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings before the LORD. After he had finished sacrificing the burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD Almighty. Then he gave a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and a cake of raisins to each person in the whole crowd of Israelites, both men and women. And all the people went to their homes.” (NIV)

God wants us all to be so filled with Joy we can't help but express it with the same unabashed enthusiasm David felt. Now not all of us are dancers. Not all of us are singers, instrumentalists, painters, or composers. But God has given you some form of expression you can use to praise and honor Him, as a way to articulate the Joy God creates in your heart. Cherish it, and, like David, don't ever be afraid to let it rip!

Because there will most certainly be people there to rain on your parade. For David, it was a woman named Michal, who was none too impressed by David's dancing.

2 Samuel 6:16-21 “As the ark of the LORD was entering the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul watched from a window. And when she saw King David

leaping and dancing before the LORD, she despised him in her heart... When David returned home to bless his household, Michal daughter of Saul came out to meet him and said, 'How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, going around half-naked in full view of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!' David said to Michal, 'It was before the LORD, who chose me rather than your father or anyone from his house when he appointed me ruler over the LORD's people Israel – I will celebrate before the LORD.' ”
(NIV)

Don't let the world get you down. Express the Joy God creates in your heart with the gifts God has given you. God loves it when His kids *celebrate the Joy of knowing Him*.

God also loves it when His children *rest in the Peace of knowing Him*. This relates to an appreciation for the seasons of life. Most climates experience seasonal changes. Most lives experience changes as well. There are very few stories carried out in an endless summer, or for that matter, in an endless winter. Life has an ebb and flow that changes like the tides or seasons.

Part of the art of life is recognizing these changes and instead of fighting against them, fully embracing them. Swim with the tide, not against it. Plant in the spring, and harvest in the fall. Feel the changes in the air, and if it's winter coming, pull out the sweaters; or if it's summer on the way, yank the cover off of the pool.

Where we get into trouble is when it's pretty clear a storm is coming, but we get out the lawn chairs, fix a glass of lemonade, and sit outside in sunglasses and a pair of Bermuda shorts. Or the sun breaks through the clouds, and we go inside, crawl into bed, and pull the covers over our heads.

There is a time for every season. The artful child of God is sensitive to these changes and experiences them to their fullest in the light of God's Word and through the power of God's Spirit. We learn or do whatever is called for by the specific season. If it's a time of elation, there is celebration. If it's a time of sorrow, there is legitimate grief. If it's time for work, the golf clubs are in the garage and the briefcase is on the desk. If it's time to play, the briefcase is in the closet, and it's off to the park with the family. And in every season, God is right there beside us, granting us Joy and Peace.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, a time to tear and a time to

mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.” (NIV)

You can fight against the seasons if you want to, but you will lose the battle and carry the scars. Don't tan in the winter. Don't bob sled in the summer. Don't harvest in the spring and plant in the fall. You'll wind up pale, lame, and hungry.

Learn to appreciate the seasons of life for what they are as they arrive, and learn not to try in vain to change the weather. In winter, bundle up and enjoy the snow. In spring, get outside and remember your umbrella. In summer, hit the lake and bring lots of sunscreen. And in fall, enjoy the leaves and chop firewood.

When we learn to embrace the seasons instead of resist them, life takes on a fullness as we experience firsthand the faithfulness of God in every circumstance – plenty, need, celebration, and sorrow. Then, just as exhaustion is replaced with exhilaration when we come to appreciate the art of life, the restless sense of dissatisfaction with the present and the fear of the future that we once knew are replaced with a poignant appreciation for what is now and whatever will be, like the colors and shades of the changing seasons. Once incomplete, we now are full, having experienced life in all its different colors. This is Peace – the depth of our eyes and the firmness of our step, the satisfaction and contentment – that comes only from following Jesus.

Philippians 4:11-20 “I (*Paul*) have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me... And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen.” (NASB)

2 Thessalonians 3:16 “Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance. The Lord be with you all!” (NASB)

The brushstrokes of God – Justice and Mercy.

As we journey through life and experience its different seasons, we will observe God painting the canvas of human history with two distinct brushes of tremendous power: Justice and Mercy.

God is holy, and God is love. God's holiness demands justice, and God's love demands mercy. It is therefore reasonable to expect a liberal helping of divine retribution in the world, and likewise to expect forgiveness to abound to repentant hearts. However, there is something we must always keep in mind: We can never be totally sure which brush God will choose to load.

Sometimes, we just know God is going to drop the hammer and let someone really have it, and we are shocked when no lightning bolts are forthcoming. Other times, we get all warm and fuzzy knowing God is going to be gentle with a wayward lamb, and we are alarmed when His discipline is swift and severe. This can be frustrating and confusing. How can we gain some perspective on the strokes of justice and mercy splashed across the landscape of our lives?

Ezekiel 18:21-32 “But if a wicked person turns away from all the sins they have committed... None of the offenses they have committed will be remembered against them... Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?... Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit... For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!” (NIV)

Acts 5:1-11 “Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife’s full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles’ feet. Then Peter said, ‘Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn’t it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn’t the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God.’ When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him. About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked her, ‘Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?’ ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘that is the price.’ Peter said to her, ‘How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.’ At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.” (NIV)

Which brush God reaches for depends upon God’s plan for individual lives and also for human history. God might let a tyrant remain in power for a very long time, if it is part of God’s overall plan for the rise and fall of nations. Or God might step on him like a bug. Sometimes, God disciplines a new believer severely, if it will set the young one on the right path early and prevent future wanderings. Sometimes, God withholds discipline entirely. *Every time*, God meets out justice and mercy as He pleases, in keeping with His good purpose, according to the wisdom of His grace.

Romans 9:17 “For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH.’ ” (NASB)

Acts 17:26 “From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.” (NIV)

Isaiah 14:24-27 “The LORD Almighty has sworn, ‘Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will happen... This is the plan determined for the whole world; this is the hand stretched out over all nations. For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?’” (NIV)

Micah 7:18,19 “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression... You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.” (NIV)

From the perspective of one of God’s children living out our lives in a fallen world, it’s very tempting to want to advise God in His selection of brushes. We want to tell Him when and how to dispense justice, and when and where to grant mercy. And while we are at it, we also like to specify the severity and liberty with which justice and mercy are ladled.

But we all know deep down inside that God does not need our help, and things tend to turn out much better when we simply trust Him to decide. There will be times when we want to see the justice of God visited upon someone for a legitimate wrong. There will be other times when we pray for God’s mercy upon ourselves or others. It can be very frustrating when we don’t get our way. But in order to know Joy and Peace, we must accept that God knows best, and pray for God to pour out justice and mercy as He sees fit according to His plan. This is part of the art of life.

1 Peter 4:12-19 “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed... Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

Isaiah 48:17 “This is what the LORD says – your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: ‘I am the LORD your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go.’ ” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 4:5 “Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts; and then each man’s praise will come to him from God.” (NASB)

The fine lines of artful living – Judgment and Esteem.

Another part of the art of life is learning to draw fine, often delicate lines, in both the way we deal with others and the way we look at ourselves.

In dealing with others, we are called to exercise good judgment, but never to be judgmental. There is a *huge* difference. As we have seen, there are many difficult choices to make in following Jesus, but with God's Word as our light and God's Spirit as our guide, we are granted good judgment in the decisions we make for ourselves.

John 7:24 "Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment." (NASB)

Proverbs 10:21 "... fools die for lack of judgment." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

When we become arrogant and prideful, good judgment is transformed into its evil twin, judgmental attitudes towards other people. You'll notice the difference right away. *Good judgment* is directed towards yourself. It is making the choices that are required of you to follow Jesus in a fallen world. *Being judgmental* is directed towards others. It is passing judgment on the choices that are required of other people, usually when we are not even aware of all the important facts surrounding their decisions.

Luke 6:37-38 "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned. Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure – pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return." (NASB)

Romans 2:1-4 "Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things... do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?" (NASB)

As followers of Jesus, we are called to *carefully* mind our *own* business. Not to recklessly mind our own business, and not to carefully mind the business of others. We are called to make good choices that reflect Christ and leave us blameless in the eyes of the world. This is exercising the fine line of good judgment.

2 Corinthians 3:3,18 "... you are a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts... And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord..." (NIV)

Galatians 6:2-5 "Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ... But each one must examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another. For each one will bear his own load." (NASB)

Philippians 2:14-16 "Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above

reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life...” (NASB)

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12 “... you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other... Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands... so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders...” (NIV)

In looking at ourselves, we are called to have self-esteem, but never to be self-righteous. Once again, there is a *huge* difference. When we start to make good choices, we start to grow. We are no longer the person we once were. And that feels good! A momentum develops. Exhaustion and emptiness are overtaken by exhilaration and fullness. We start to respect ourselves, in a very healthy way. We know a sense of personal dignity that was never there before. Esteem builds respect. Respect builds dignity. Together, self-esteem, self-respect, and personal dignity form the healthy self-image that God, by His grace, wants His children to see when they look in the mirror.

Titus 3:1-8 “Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every consideration for all men. For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us... concerning these things I want you to speak confidently, so that those who have believed God will be careful to engage in good deeds. These things are good and profitable for men.” (NASB)

Ephesians 2:1-9 “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world... we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)... so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (NASB)

Ephesians 4:13-24 “... reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work... you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and

separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed. That, however, is not the way of life you learned... put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” (NASB)

When we become arrogant and prideful, self-esteem is transformed into its evil twin, self-righteousness. Instead of feeling good about what’s going on in our own lives, we condemn what’s going on in the lives of others. The difference is obvious. *Self-esteem* comes from comparing our old, lost self to our new, better self. *Self-righteousness* comes from comparing a twisted image of ourselves to an equally distorted view of others. Instead of looking up to God and being grateful for what He is doing in our lives, we look down on others with hypocrisy and scorn.

Romans 14:1-19 “Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions... Who are you to judge...? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand... But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, ‘AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LORD, EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW TO ME, AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL GIVE PRAISE TO GOD.’ So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God. Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this – not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way... For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.” (NASB)

Matthew 7:1-5 “Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” (NASB)

Luke 18:9-14 “And He (*Jesus*) also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: ‘Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: “God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.” But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner!” I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.’ ” (NASB)

As followers of Jesus, we enjoy a slow, steady increase in our self-esteem as we advance from spiritual infancy to spiritual adulthood, and as our light in the world burns brighter and brighter. If we take our eyes off of Jesus, we suffer from a slow, steady increase in our egos, and digress from spiritual infancy to spiritual apostasy, until our light is snuffed out by the cold winds of prideful arrogance. This is crossing the fine but clear line of self-esteem into the mire of self-righteousness.

Romans 12:2-18 “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment... do not be haughty in mind... Do not be wise in your own estimation... If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.” (NASB)

1 Thessalonians 5:5-23 “You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness... Therefore encourage one another and build each other up... Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit... hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil... May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (NASB)

A person with good judgment and self-esteem is a powerful witness for Christ. People respect a man or woman who is able to govern well their own affairs, without passing judgment on how other people live their lives. The outside world also admires a man or woman who is able to feel good about themselves, without a psychological need to stand atop a pile of foes and neighbors who are considered inferior. We want what wise, well-adjusted men and women have, and what they have is Jesus.

Matthew 5:14-16 “You are the light of the world... Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 6:1-10 “... we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain... giving no cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry be not discredited... as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things.” (NASB)

Proverbs 3:3,4 “Do not let kindness and truth leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. So you will find favor and good repute in the sight of God and man.” (NASB)

1 Peter 3:15,16 “but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that

is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame.” (NASB)

Titus 2:7,8 “in all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, with purity in doctrine, dignified, sound in speech which is beyond reproach, so that the opponent will be put to shame, having nothing bad to say about us.” (NASB)

Titus 2:10 “... in every way... make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.” (NIV)

On the other hand, a Christian who is judgmental or self-righteous is the perhaps the greatest enemy of Jesus, because of the damage their bad example can do to the cause of Christ. Why on earth would anyone want to follow Jesus if those who proclaim Him devote their lives to grinding others into the dirt? That is not what Jesus did! He lifted people up and showed them a better way, in every thought, word, and deed. And He did so without ever becoming judgmental or self-righteous. Jesus is the creator of the art of life, and we should follow His technique in mastering the delicate lines of good judgment and self-esteem.

Titus 2:13,14 “... Jesus Christ... gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for Himself a people that are His very own, eager to do what is good.” (NIV)

John 8:3-11 “The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the center of the court, they said to Him, ‘Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?’ They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down and with His finger wrote on the ground. But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, ‘He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.’ Again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the center of the court. Straightening up, Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?’ She said, ‘No one, Lord.’ And Jesus said, ‘I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more.’” (NASB)

Matthew 9:10-13 “Then it happened that as Jesus was reclining at the table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, ‘Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?’ But when Jesus heard this, He said, ‘It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: “I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE,” for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.’” (NASB)

Romans 2:1-24 “Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things... You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? For ‘THE NAME OF GOD IS

**BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF YOU,' just as it is written."
(NASB)**

How did Jesus do it, and how can we follow His example? We may earnestly desire to make good choices without standing in judgment of the choices of others, but many times the decisions life forces upon us put us directly at odds with the world. In order to do the right thing, many times we have no choice but to make our decisions in full view of people and institutions that will aggressively challenge what we believe. In times like these, how do we make wise judgments for ourselves, without becoming judgmental of others? How can we enjoy a growing self-esteem, without falling into self-righteousness?

Take your stand, and speak the truth in love.

There are two broad principles that guide us when we are called to make decisions before the world:

1. Take your stand; and
2. Speak the truth in love.

1. Take Your Stand.

Everyone's journey through life is different. Some get to walk a mostly clear, straight path, with plenty of sunshine and grassy turf. Others must navigate a winding road, over rocks and boulders in the midst of a thunderstorm. Regardless of the road we are destined to take, sooner or later everyone comes to a point in their journey where they must choose to either: Take a stand or follow the crowd.

Ephesians 6:10-13 "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand." (NIV)

Psalm 94:16 "... Who will take his stand for me against those who do wickedness?" (NASB)

Exodus 23:2 "Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd," (NIV)

Job 31:34 "... I so feared the crowd and so dreaded the contempt of the clans that I kept silent and would not go outside –" (NIV)

Mathew 27:11-26 "Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor (*Pilate*)... when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, 'Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?' For he knew it

was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him. While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: 'Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him.' But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed. 'Which of the two do you want me to release to you?' asked the governor. 'Barabbas,' they answered. 'What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?' Pilate asked. They all answered, 'Crucify him!' 'Why? What crime has he committed?' asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, 'Crucify him!' When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. 'I am innocent of this man's blood,' he said. 'It is your responsibility!' All the people answered, 'His blood is on us and on our children!' Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified." (NIV)

We live out our lives in a fallen world and in order to be a light within it, there will be times when we must take an appointed stand. We have to stand up and be counted for what we believe. Otherwise, we are a light hidden underneath a basket that leaves the world in the dark. Lights belong on lamp stands, where everyone can gather around and see, and there are times in life when we must likewise stand up and be counted, so those around us can be illuminated.

Matthew 5:14-16 "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." (NASB)

In taking our stand, some observers will like what they see, but some will not. There are those in this world who run from the light and even do their best to snuff it out. But we are not responsible for the reactions of others. We are simply responsible, when required, to stand.

John 3:17-21 "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him... This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God." (NASB)

1 Peter 2:9-23 "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light... Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they

accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us... For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men... To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

John 15:18-21 “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me (*Jesus*) first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you... If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me.” (NIV)

What does it mean to *take your stand*? First, we should note we are called to “stand.” Not charge. Not retreat. Not conduct guerilla warfare. Just stand. The world can do what it will, whether that means running past us at 900 miles per hour, or straight at us at Mach 5. No matter what the world is doing, we are called to stand up, straight and tall, and make the choice that is honoring to God.

It's interesting to note that when God's Word describes the way we are to act before the world, it does not use offensive metaphors. The Bible does not tell us to “charge” or “attack.” Nor does it use defensive metaphors, like “retreat” or “take cover.” It certainly doesn't tell us to fight dirty. Instead, we are called to “stand.”

Many times we want to go out and change the world. But when we look carefully at God's Word, it does not actually instruct us to go out and change the world. Change comes to the world when individuals choose to respond to the voice of God that calls out to them, and that is a matter between the grace of God and the freewill of the individual. It is something we cannot do for others. We can only do it for ourselves. We are therefore instructed to change, not who *others* are, but who *we* are.

Matthew 7:1-5 “Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.” (NASB)

Then, when we honor God in our thoughts, words, and deeds, the world takes note of our stand, which in turn causes those in the world to objectively examine their own thoughts, words, and deeds. And that is the priceless moment God's Spirit can seize to speak to the hearts of the lost.

When Christians go on the warpath, they only injure the cause of Christ. Souls are not won by bashing them over the head with a Bible. Neither are souls won by Christians trembling in the cellar, afraid to stick up for what they believe. Souls are won and the cause of Christ is advanced when Christians stand firm in a fallen world.

Romans 14:1-19 “Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions... Who are you to judge... another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand... So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.” (NASB)

Romans 1:16 “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes...” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 4:2 “... we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.” (NIV)

In a sense, standing is a very neutral (though decisive and powerful) act. It is neither aggressive nor fearful, and *that’s what makes it effective*. If we are aggressive, then the natural response of the world is to become defensive. Both sides “put up their dukes” and eventually end up bloody and broken. If we are fearful, then the natural response of the world is to lose respect, if they take any notice at all. To be a light in the darkness, we don’t want the world around us with its defenses up high, or its esteem down low. We want objectivity and respect, and that comes from planting two feet on your own ground and taking the stand to which you are called.

A second principle to note about “taking your stand” is that you are called to take *your* stand. Not someone else’s stand. Don’t try to jump in and do what another person is called to accomplish. God has a special plan and vital purpose designed specifically for your life, and you are going to have plenty to do. Focus on that. Sometimes we want to bump other people out of the way and take their stand for them, but we are not made or equipped to take another person’s stand, while by God’s grace the other person is uniquely created and qualified for it. Of course we should encourage others and pray for their “stands,” but never attempt to usurp them.

Your stand is part of your destiny. It is part of who you are created to be and what you are created to do in the plan of God. All that you are and all that you experience blend together to create in you the ideal person to stand your appointed ground. This includes not only your strengths and victories, but also (and sometimes especially) your weaknesses and failures.

We all want bulging biceps and unblemished histories of triumph, but within this fallen world the truth is: We’re all going to be a little flabby in certain spots, and we’re all going to experience spectacular failures. God knows this, and by His grace He

actually allows our weaknesses and failures to contribute to our value in His plan. In fact, He uses them to make us even more effective.

For example, it's hard to relate to a Mr. Universe who has never lost a competition. You have to wonder whether those muscles come from lifting weights or from a syringe full of anabolic steroids, and whether that perfect track record is earned or purchased. On the other hand, if you are struggling and need help, it's much easier to listen to someone who shares your weaknesses and has experienced your failures, but who has also overcome them by the grace of a loving Heavenly Father.

If you are following Jesus, God will grant to you a unique *perspective and power* within the fallen world that can be used for His service. This perspective and power grows from your God-given passions and abilities, and the wisdom and compassion you will inevitably gain from both your victories *and* defeats.

Your *perspective* is the unique insight God grants to you as you walk with Him along your particular path in life. Everything you see and learn and do will contribute to the truth that builds up inside your spirit. Your *power* is the God-given ability to communicate these truths effectively to those you encounter as you take your stand in a fallen world.

God prepares the *person*, and God prepares the *ground*. While God is completing His work in you, He is also preparing the ground upon which you will one day stand, so the match between the person and the ground will be dynamic. Then as you walk with God and the time comes for you to stand, the ground upon which your feet are planted will perfectly suit the unique perspective and power God has fashioned in you.

Isaiah 43:1-5 “But now, this is what the LORD says – he who created you... he who formed you... ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior... Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you... Do not be afraid, for I am with you...’ ” (NIV)

2 Timothy 1:6-9 “... fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you... God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord... by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Psalms 107:2-43 “Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story... they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way... Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind, for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things... they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he

saved them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness, the utter darkness, and broke away their chains. Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds... tell of his works with songs of joy... Let the one who is wise heed these things and ponder the loving deeds of the LORD.” (NIV)

God tills the heart the way a plowman tills the soil: So it can receive seed and bear fruit. As God prepares your heart, God will also prepare the hearts of those you will encounter, so when it is time for you to take your unique stand on your unique plot of ground, those who witness your stand will see and hear what will help them most. Your stand on your ground will be tailor made to express a particular truth powerfully to someone whose heart is prepared for exposure to it. Not that all will respond to the truth they receive, but a seed of truth will be planted that each individual will have the choice to tend or abandon. Then you have accomplished your purpose, and the rest is between God’s grace and the individual’s freewill.

Philemon 1:6 “I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

1 Peter 3:15,16 “But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.” (NIV)

Finally, in “taking our stand” we should note we are called to *stand firm*, not stand up and sit right back down. The child of God should not be shouted down in the town hall of life. There is an element of *perseverance* in taking your stand. We have to be prepared to endure ridicule and scorn and even worldly loss in standing for something. To stand then sit and blend back in is not really taking any stance at all. That’s a hiccup in a fallen world that is easily excused and passed over as if it had never happened. We are called to stand firm and be permanently counted.

Philippians 4:1-13 “... stand firm in the Lord... Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things... and the God of peace will be with you... I (*Paul*) have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” (NASB)

Hebrews 10:38 “... I (*God*) take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back...” (NIV)

There is a reason to stand firm, permanently with confidence: We do not stand alone. God is by our side all the while. There is no adversity we will ever meet as we take our stand that our Savior did not first experience a hundred times over. He overcame everything this world could throw at Him, and so will we if we will trust in Him, and take our stand with courage, conviction, and hope.

2 Corinthians 1:21-24 “Now it is God who makes... you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set His seal of ownership on us, and put His Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come... because it is by faith you stand firm.” (NIV)

2 Chronicles 20:17 “You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the LORD will give you... Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged... the LORD will be with you.” (NIV)

Deuteronomy 31:6-8 “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified... for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you... The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.” (NIV)

John 16:33 “These things I (*Jesus*) have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.” (NASB)

Luke 6:22,23 “Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven...” (NIV)

Proverbs 3:25,26 “Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, for the LORD will be at your side and will keep your foot from being snared.” (NIV)

Hebrews 10:22-36 “let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings... Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful... Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.” (NIV)

We now understand that in this life we are often called to take a stand before the world. How exactly do we do that? We're not supposed to get out the hatchets and go on the warpath, and we're not supposed to turn tail and run. How do God's children stand firm in a fallen world?

2. Speak the truth in love.

If it is your time to stand, and you are at a loss for what you should say or do, here's the simple and complete answer: Speak the truth in love. This is how we, as followers of Jesus, are called to take our stand in a fallen world.

Ephesians 4:1-15 “... live a life worthy of the calling you have received... equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.” (NIV)

There are two distinct but inseparable components to “speaking the truth in love.” They are *two* sides of *one* coin, and if they are not *both* present, then we are not following Jesus’ example. The effectiveness of our stand depends on doing both of these two things simultaneously.

- ❖ The first is: Speak the truth.
- ❖ The second is: Speak with love.

Speak the truth. In order to help someone, we have to speak the truth. Not what is easy or expedient. Not the things people want to hear. And not sugar coated nonsense. The truth. And it’s a funny thing about truth, often people don’t particularly want to hear it. In fact, many times people would rather hear nails across a chalkboard.

Ephesians 4:25 “Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor...” (NIV)

2 Timothy 4:3,4 “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.” (NASB)

Proverbs 18:2 “Fools find no pleasure in understanding but delight in airing their own opinions.” (NIV)

2 Timothy 3:2-7 “For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant... holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; avoid such men as these. For among them are those who enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (NASB)

Truth can be unsettling. Truth is always uncompromising. And sometimes it is excruciatingly painful. But it is also the one thing God’s Spirit can use to confront,

correct, heal, and empower the human spirit. So when the time comes to stand, it's not eloquence, emotion, or appearance that matters. What matters is: Truth.

2 Timothy 2:15 “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.” (NASB)

Hebrews 4:12 “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (NASB)

2 Timothy 3:16,17 “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 2:1-5 “... When I (*Paul*) came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.” (NIV)

Speak with love. If we want to stand for Christ, it's not enough to only speak the truth. We must also speak with love. In speaking the truth, we emphasize the *content* of our speech. In speaking with love, we emphasize the *manner* of our speech. Truth should not be communicated through hateful, angry, arrogant words. For truth to be communicated effectively, it must be shared with all the hallmarks of Jesus' love – patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control – the “Fruit of the Spirit” we examined in Chapter 5.

1 Peter 3:15 “but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence;” (NASB)

2 Timothy 2:24-26 “The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses...” (NASB)

1 Thessalonians 2:6-12 “... as apostles of Christ we... were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children... For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into His kingdom and glory.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

How we speak is as important as *what* we speak, if we are going to follow the example of Christ. All too often, self-righteous, judgmental, hypocritical, dishonest people say perfectly true things about Jesus, but the lost aren't listening, because who would rightly place their trust in the words of someone like that?

Romans 2:23,24 “You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? For ‘THE NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF YOU,’ just as it is written.” (NASB)

2 Peter 2:1-3 “... there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies... Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with false words...” (NASB)

Titus 1:16 “They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good.” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 6:1-10 “... we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain... giving no cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry be not discredited... as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things.” (NASB)

The love of Jesus within us (demonstrated through patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control) destroys stereotypes. It pulls down defensive psychological barriers. It engenders respect and objectivity, and eventually, trust.

Then truth is blindingly clear, unobstructed by the haze dishonorable behavior spills into the atmosphere between a person sharing truth and the listener. Love purifies the air, so truth can be presented without the residue of hate. It's the difference between talking with someone on a crisp, clear, quiet morning or during a typhoon. Truth can still be communicated during a typhoon, but it's a lot more difficult to hear.

Proverbs 15:1-7 “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise makes knowledge acceptable, but the mouth of fools spouts folly... A soothing tongue is a tree of life, but perversion in it crushes the spirit... The lips of the wise spread knowledge, but the hearts of fools are not so.” (NASB)

Proverbs 25:15 “Through patience a ruler can be persuaded, and a gentle tongue can break a bone.” (NIV)

We are called to speak the truth and live by the truth, by speaking with love. This is taking your stand in a fallen world. Both your words and your actions reflect truth. When the truth of your words matches the truth of your behavior, then you can be trusted, and gaining the trust of the lost is an important key in making an effective stand for Christ. When you are trusted, your stand is received as neither judgmental nor self-righteous. It is simply a reflection of the truth that is alive within you.

Proverbs 3:3,4 “Do not let kindness and truth leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. So you will find favor and good repute in the sight of God and man.” (NASB)

James 3:13-17 “Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom... the wisdom from

above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 4:2-10 “... we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ... For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.” (NASB)

Truth can be a bitter pill to swallow. The love of a true follower of Jesus makes it palatable. Then once the lost are able to wash down truth, it detoxifies the soul and becomes sweet to the taste.

Titus 2:10 “... in every way... make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 2:14-17 “But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task? Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God.” (NIV)

Psalms 119:89-172 “Your word, LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens... How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path. Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path... The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple... May my cry come before you, LORD; give me understanding according to your word. May my supplication come before you; deliver me according to your promise... May my tongue sing of your word...” (NIV)

Speaking the truth with hatred in any of its various guises (such as self-righteousness, hypocrisy, anger, or condemnation) provides the lost with any number of excuses to reject truth. The truth can be sidestepped when the speaker is without love. The focus too easily shifts from the content of the message to the character of the messenger. Love is the agent that ensures there exists no excuse to avoid truth.

1 John 2:10 “The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 3:3,18 “... you are a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts... And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord...” (NIV)

We are not to: Speak the truth without love. An equally (if not more) important principle is that we are not to: Remain lovingly silent. In a miraculous way, God can use truth even though it is communicated by a total jerk, because “His word will not return empty.” God’s Spirit can help the listener see beyond the misbehavior of the speaker and into the truth, so the exchange of truth without love can still benefit the listener with a humble heart (although there will ultimately be no reward for the errant speaker). This is a testament to the power of God’s Word and Spirit.

Isaiah 55:10,11 “As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” (NIV)

Philippians 1:15-18 “It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so out of love... The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition... But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I (*Paul*) rejoice...” (NIV)

On the other hand, if we are really nice but never speak the truth, there is nothing for God’s Spirit to work with. There is no tool to pry open the human heart. We become just one of any number of kind-hearted people in the world, who are somewhat appreciated but ultimately without eternal impact.

In order to make a difference, God’s children must speak. We must share the truth of Christ. A loving mute cannot take a stand in a fallen world. We have to speak in order to stand for something. To be a very loving person, but never confess the source of our love, is ultimately inconsequential in the great drama of life. People might think we are really kind, but they will never through us discover Jesus.

Colossians 4:5,6 “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.” (NIV)

Matthew 5:13-16 “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and

put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” (NASB)

Loving acts are wonderful. Through them we gain the respect and objectivity of the world. This is one purpose of acts of Christ-like love, to open minds so truth can be received. But to gain respect and objectivity and then remain silent defeats this purpose. It makes it all for naught. No one ever came to the knowledge of truth through exposure to someone who smiles sweetly but refuses to talk. To share truth we must speak, with gentleness, reverence, and love.

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12 “... you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other... Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands... so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders...” (NIV)

1 Peter 2:10-17 “... you are the people of God... Live such good lives among the pagans that... they may see your good deeds and glorify God... Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men... For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Titus 2:1-8 “... speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine. Older men are to be temperate, dignified, sensible, sound in faith, in love, in perseverance. Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be sensible, pure... kind... that the word of God will not be dishonored. Likewise urge the young men to be sensible; in all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, with purity in doctrine, dignified, sound in speech which is beyond reproach, so that the opponent will be put to shame, having nothing bad to say about us.” (NASB)

Love with silence is not a stand at all, and in some respects it is a distraction from what is actually needed: Truth. Most people appreciate and respect loving acts, but if they are never accompanied by words of truth, they eventually just blend in with the background noise of life, or are overshadowed by other events of good or evil, and finally begin to feel somewhat pointless as the desperation of life without truth inevitably sets in. Ultimately, they fade away and are forgotten.

1 Peter 1:22-25 “Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart, for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God. For, ‘ALL FLESH IS LIKE GRASS, AND ALL ITS GLORY LIKE THE FLOWER OF GRASS. THE GRASS WITHERS,

AND THE FLOWER FALLS OFF, BUT THE WORD OF THE LORD ENDURES FOREVER...’” (NASB)

Only truth has lasting impact. Truth burns into the human soul like a brand. Try as we may to ignore it, once we are exposed to truth, we are never the same. It’s there, whether we like it or not, and neither traumatic events nor the passage of time can cause it to disappear. Then, even if it is something we heard long ago, God’s Spirit will bring the truth to our minds when we need it.

Jeremiah 23:28-40 “... let him who has My word speak My word in truth... Is not My word like fire?... and like a hammer which shatters a rock?... you have perverted the words of the living God, the LORD of hosts... I will surely forget you and cast you away from My presence... I will put an everlasting reproach on you and an everlasting humiliation which will not be forgotten.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 4:2 “... we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.” (NIV)

John 14:26 “... He (*the Holy Spirit*) will... bring to your remembrance all that I (*Jesus*) said to you.” (NASB)

That’s why speaking the truth with love is so important. When it is time for you to take your stand, do it! Seize the opportunity, because the truth you share, even if it is totally rejected at the time, will stay with the other person for the rest of their lives. It might get pushed way back into some dark corner of the mind, but if the listener ever chooses to humble themselves before God, God’s Spirit will sweep away the clutter and throw a spot light on the truth you shared. And your stand, no matter how long ago, will have accomplished its appointed purpose.

Ephesians 2:10 “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

We don’t have to go looking for stands to take. If we are following Jesus, they will quite naturally present themselves. Following Jesus breeds crossroads in life, and as they appear you will have plenty of opportunities to take your stand. When you do, the key is simple: Don’t duck! Don’t smile, be really nice, and hold your tongue. Speak the truth in love, and your stands will be many and fruitful.

John 15:16-27 “... I (*Jesus*) chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last... I will send to you from the Father – the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father – he will testify about me. And you also must testify...” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 4:13 “It is written: ‘I believed; therefore I have spoken.’ Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us...” (NIV)

1 Thessalonians 2:3,4 “For our exhortation does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit; but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts.” (NASB)

Proverbs 31:8,9 “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.” (NIV)

Romans 1:16 “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes...” (NIV)

Philemon 1:6 “I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Proverbs 11:30 “The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who is wise wins souls.” (NASB)

Stands will also help ensure you stay on the right path in life, because many times they *decrease* your options. If you correctly take your stand, the consequences of your decision may turn your crossroads into a single lane highway, with only one direction to go. Opportunities you think you want to pursue will vanish because you made the right but difficult choice, and it may on the surface appear you have suffered a great loss.

But this is often the way God takes us by the shoulders and points us in the right direction. We take a stand, and lose a job or a friend or a privilege. And the loss hurts. But as we press on, God provides another job, different friends, other privileges, and these are the ones in keeping with His will for our lives. “Stands” have a powerful way of propelling us forward, straight into the plan and purpose of the living God.

Proverbs 3:13-26 “Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed... My son, do not let wisdom and understanding out of your sight, preserve sound judgment and discretion; they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck. Then you will go on your way in safety, and your foot will not stumble. When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, for the LORD will be at your side and will keep your foot from being snared.” (NIV)

Proverbs 19:1 “Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity than he who is perverse in speech and is a fool.” (NASB)

Psalms 25:8-14 “Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. All

the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful toward those who keep the demands of his covenant... Who, then, are those who fear the LORD? He will instruct them in the ways they should choose. They will spend their days in prosperity... The LORD confides in those who fear him..." (NIV)

Proverbs 1:10-19 "My son, if sinful men entice you, do not give in to them. If they say, 'Come along with us... cast lots with us, and we will share the loot' – my son, do not go along with them, do not set foot on their paths; for their feet rush into evil... they ambush only themselves! Such are the paths of all who go after ill-gotten gain; it takes away the life of those who get it." (NIV)

Psalms 37:1-24 "Do not fret because of those who are evil... Trust in the LORD and do good... Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your vindication like the noonday sun. Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him... The LORD makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him; though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand." (NIV)

Proverbs 3:5,6 "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight." (NIV)

Conflict in relationships: Forgiveness and Accountability.

We often carry misconceptions about what it means to love. Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is tenderhearted and gentle. But love is not wimpy. Love is not spineless. And love is emphatically not the avoidance of conflict.

On the contrary, following Jesus *guarantees* conflict. To speak the truth in love in a fallen world is to walk into a thunderstorm and mount a lightning rod on the top of your head. Your decisions to follow Christ will put you at odds with the world, and the resulting friction will charge the atmosphere such that conflict is irresistibly drawn to you. We are called, therefore, not to avoid conflict (which is impossible), but to stand firm and speak the truth in love within it.

Matthew 10:34-39 "Do not suppose that I (*Jesus*) have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn 'a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law – a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.' Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it." (NIV)

Luke 12:49-53 "I (*Jesus*) have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!... Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be

divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.” (NIV)

Of course we are not to go out and seek conflict. So far as it depends on us, we are to be at peace with everyone. But when we are called to stand, and conflict begins to take shape, we are not to retreat and remain silent. As Jesus’ representatives on earth – the light in the darkness – we are to speak the truth in love.

Romans 12:14-18 “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse... Never pay back evil for evil to anyone... If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.” (NASB)

Proverbs 20:3 “It is one’s honor to avoid strife, but every fool is quick to quarrel.” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 5:20 “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us...” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 2:14-17 “But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task? Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God.” (NIV)

2 Timothy 2:24-26 “The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses...” (NASB)

Knowing how and when to speak the truth in love can be very difficult. Sometimes we feel torn between the commands to be patient, kind, and forgiving, and also to take a stand in the face of evil. On the one hand, it seems we are called to always forgive other people. On the other hand, it seems equally true we are called to stand, and in so doing, hold wrongdoers accountable for their decisions. What are some basic principles that can help us know what to do when we find ourselves in conflict?

Let’s look first at forgiveness. If someone wrongs us, honestly repents, and asks for forgiveness, this is a black and white issue. There is no question as to how we are to behave. As God in Christ has forgiven us, so are we to forgive others – genuinely, completely, and permanently.

Luke 17:3,4 “... If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” (NASB)

Matthew 18:21-35 “Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?’ Jesus

answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. At this the servant fell on his knees before him. "Be patient with me," he begged, "and I will pay back everything." The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. "Pay back what you owe me!" he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, "Be patient with me, and I will pay it back." But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. "You wicked servant," he said, "I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.' " (NIV)

Ephesians 4:31,32 "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (NIV)

But what if someone wrongs us, and doesn't ask to be forgiven? What if the other person refuses to admit they have sinned, and acts as if their behavior is somehow justified? How do we handle a remorseless heart?

In this case we are still called to forgive the other person, in the sense that we do not harbor hateful or bitter feelings towards them. The person is lost and needs our prayers and compassion. We are also to treat them with patience and kindness.

But as it relates to *relationship*, a difference arises in how we deal with the person who asks for forgiveness and the person who is unrepentant. When forgiveness is sought and forgiveness is granted, relationships are *restored* and even strengthened, as God intends. That's one of the many great things about forgiveness.

But when one person wrongs another and refuses to seek forgiveness (and as is usually the case, refuses to admit wrongdoing), relationship is *unrestored*. There is not a true, godly relationship between two people when one unrepentantly wrongs the other. Now the question becomes: How are we as followers of Jesus to treat the unrepentant person?

As we just saw, we are called to forgive, in the sense we do not hold on to hateful or bitter feelings. We should continue to be patient and kind as part of the fruit of the

Spirit God creates within us. But as it relates to relationship, there is nothing in God's Word that says we must have close relationships with abusive people. The commandment to love our neighbor does not mean we are chained forever to those who mistreat us or who have turned their backs on God. When we are wronged and the person is unrepentant, God's Word clearly allows us to break off the relationship.*

Matthew 18:15-17 “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.” (NIV)

1 Thessalonians 4:6,7 “... no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.” (NIV)

This principle can be abused. Not every wrong is sufficient grounds for us to cut off a relationship with someone. If we ended relationships each and every time a person mistreated us, then there would be no relationships on the entire planet! How do we know when it is God's will for us to endure a wrong or end a relationship?

One thing to consider is the *nature of the relationship*. Is this a close relationship or something less? The closer the relationship, the more accountable we can and should hold the other person for their actions (see the discussion of accountability that follows). Abuse in close relationships is not necessarily to be endured but rather redressed.

We should also consider the *spiritual maturity of the offender*. Is this the behavior of a lost person who doesn't know any better, or is this the behavior of a spiritually mature person who is knowingly doing wrong? “Turning the other cheek” can be a powerful witness to a person who is lost in the darkness of a fallen world. On the other hand, your brother shouldn't be slapping you!

Proverbs 25:21,22 “If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you.” (NIV)

Psalms 133:1 “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is of brothers to dwell together in unity!” (NASB)

* The discussion that follows relates to relationships in general, not necessarily to marriage. Marriage is a special relationship (outside the scope of this work) that has more specific guidelines found in God's Word. These guidelines should be considered when conflicts arise within marriages.

It's important to weigh the *severity of the wrong*. Is this a major, willful error or something less? The more severe the wrongdoing, the more important it can be to confront and address the problem. On the other hand, we shouldn't sacrifice relationships over trivial things.

Proverbs 12:16 “Fools show their annoyance at once, but the prudent overlook an insult.” (NIV)

Finally, we should consider our *responsibility to others*. Is the bad behavior only affecting us, or does it also spill over into the lives of others, especially those for whose well-being we are responsible? It is important that in our efforts to forgive wrongdoers we do not allow injury to the innocent.

Nehemiah 4:14 “... Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.” (NIV)

There are no hard and fast rules in this area of life. We must consider all of the relevant facts and seek the Lord's guidance in prayer. It might be God's will for us to endure an abusive relationship for a higher purpose. It might be His will for us to be free and move on. As we seek the Lord's direction with a humble heart, He will in time clearly reveal it to us. (How we hear from God in times like these will be discussed later in this study.) And if we are to continue the relationship, we will be strengthened. If we are to end it, we will be able to do so without guilt.

Jeremiah 29:13 “You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.” (NASB)

Jeremiah 33:3 “Call to Me and I will answer you, and I will tell you great and mighty things, which you do not know.” (NASB)

James 1:5 “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.” (NASB)

Psalms 25:8-14 “Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful toward those who keep the demands of his covenant... Who, then, are those who fear the LORD? He will instruct them in the ways they should choose... The LORD confides in those who fear him...” (NIV)

This relates to the self-esteem God wants His children to enjoy. Every child of God should possess a healthy sense of personal dignity that strengthens them when they are mistreated, so they are able to return good for evil, and when appropriate endure or end troubled relationships.

Romans 8:1-39 “... there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus... You... are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit... you did not

receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship... The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory... And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose... What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

This is a part of life that requires sound judgment. It is one of the fine lines of artful living God's Word and Spirit help us draw. We are clearly called to “turn the other cheek.” We are also clearly called to “expel the wicked man from among us.” God's Spirit guides humble hearts to properly apply these truths so we know how to stand firm amidst the tempest of human relationships.

Luke 6:27-37 “But to you who are listening I (*Jesus*) say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 5:1-13 “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate: A man is sleeping with his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this?... I (*Paul*) wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral

people – not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. ‘Expel the wicked person from among you.’” (NIV)

Now let’s look at accountability. We are unequivocally called to forgive. We are also unequivocally called to hold each other accountable for our actions. On the surface, these seem to be conflicting instructions. How do we forgive someone, and also tell them they are doing wrong?

The answer is: Speak the truth in love. There is no conflict when we share truth in a loving manner. By speaking the truth, we hold one another accountable. By speaking with love, we demonstrate forgiveness. Only one who forgives can speak with love.

Galatians 6:1-10 “Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves. Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else, for each one should carry their own load... Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” (NIV)

Holding an erring person accountable for wrong decisions is one of the most loving things we can do. If a person is about to jump off a cliff because he thinks if he flaps his arms fast enough he will be able to fly, it is not “love” to shout: “Do whatever you think is right and makes you happy! Just know I love you no matter what!” That is cowardice. It is fear of confrontation. The loving thing is to shout: “Hey, Einstein! You’re not going to fly! You’re going to splatter all over the rocks below!”

Proverbs 27:5,6 “Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.” (NIV)

Proverbs 17:10 “A rebuke impresses a discerning person more than a hundred lashes a fool.” (NIV)

Ecclesiastes 7:5 “It is better to heed the rebuke of a wise person than to listen to the song of fools.” (NIV)

Yet the former is what we do all the time. We see brothers and sisters in Christ turning their backs on God, making what are clearly sinful choices, and instead of confronting them with the reality of their lives (with gentleness and reverence), we pat them on the back (with gentleness and reverence) and say: “I love you no matter what. Just do whatever makes you happy.” In doing so, we are in some ways complicit in their sin.

Leviticus 19:17 “... Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt.” (NIV)

Ephesians 4:25 “Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor...” (NIV)

There is a distorted view of forgiveness that holds we must “forgive” sinful behavior in the sense that we tolerate and accept it. We don’t hold others accountable for sinful behavior, because that would be self-righteous and judgmental. We just “love” the sinner and leave it in God’s hands.

Here is another fine, delicate line to draw. Holding a person accountable for sinful behavior can truly be a self-righteous and judgmental act, when we do not speak the truth in love. But remaining silent is equally wrong. Loving silence in the face of sin is just as inappropriate as self-righteous speech. Neither is how we are called to take our stand in a fallen world.

Proverbs 25:12 “Like an earring of gold or an ornament of fine gold is the rebuke of a wise judge to a listening ear.” (NIV)

It is not “love” to tolerate sin. It is sin to tolerate sin. It is condoning sinful behavior by way of silence. And so we are to speak the truth, but always with love. In this way, we *both* forgive *and* hold accountable (not *either* forgive *or* hold accountable). Speaking the truth in love is how we truly love a person who is clearly on the wrong path, and though initially they may not like it, if they ever humble their hearts, they will one day be sincerely grateful for your stand.

Proverbs 28:23 “He who rebukes a man will afterward find more favor than he who flatters with the tongue.” (NASB)

How do we know when it is our job to jump in and hold someone accountable? A common sense place to start is to look at the *closeness of the relationship*. If it is your blood relative, then you are family, and if you love your family you will not sit idly by and do nothing when they turn their back on God. You will act, quickly and decisively.

Proverbs 13:24 “Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them.” (NIV)

Proverbs 22:6 “Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it.” (NASB)

1 Timothy 5:8 “Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” (NIV)

The same holds true with close friends. The decision becomes more difficult when the errant person is merely an acquaintance or perhaps even a stranger. Then we should look at our *closeness to the problem*. Are we directly involved in some way, or is this just something we saw on television happening on another continent? The closer we are to the problem, the more we should consider becoming involved in resolving it.

Proverbs 26:17 “Like one who grabs a stray dog by the ears is someone who rushes into a quarrel not their own.” (NIV)

1 Timothy 5:13 “... they get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

We are not called to stick our noses into other people’s business. We are called to take our particular stand in our unique journey through life. If we are personally touched by a specific matter, there are times when we should stand firm and confront even those we hardly know with truth in a loving way. God’s Spirit, as always, is our guide, and it will be His delight to prompt our spirit to do what we are called to do in the Father’s plan when we humbly seek His guidance.

Isaiah 48:17 “This is what the LORD says – your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: ‘I am the LORD your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go.’ ” (NIV)

Colossians 3:12-17 “... put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another... Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.” (NASB)

Jesus, as always, is our role model. If we examine the way He dealt with conflict we can gain great insight into the way we should deal with conflict. There are many examples of Jesus encountering hostility and enmity. His life was fraught with it, and every time He handled it with amazing clarity and effectiveness. (See Matthew 22, Mark 12, and Luke 20.) Let’s look at two rather extreme examples from Jesus’ life, and see what we can learn from them.

The first is Jesus' encounter with the adulterous woman.

John 8:1-11 “but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?’ They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’ Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ ‘No one, sir,’ she said. ‘Then neither do I condemn you,’ Jesus declared. ‘Go now and leave your life of sin.’ ” (NIV)

The second is the “Seven Woes” proclaimed to the Scribes (teachers of the Jewish law) and Pharisees (a sect known for their strict observance of Jewish traditions).

Matthew 23:1-33 “Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ‘The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called “Rabbi” by others.... Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are. Woe to you, blind guides! You say, “If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath.” You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, “If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath.” You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Therefore, anyone who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And anyone who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And anyone who swears by heaven swears by God’s throne and by the one who sits on it. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your

spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, “If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.” So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started! You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?” (NIV)

Here are two dramatic and very different examples of Jesus dealing with conflict. In the encounter with the Adulterous Woman, Jesus is tender and gentle. When the teachers of the law and the Pharisees first question Him, Jesus quietly ignores them, drawing with His finger in the dust on the ground. When the Pharisees persist, He sweeps them from the scene with a single phrase, perhaps the most powerful sermon on hypocrisy ever delivered: *“Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”*

Then Jesus stoops down, continues drawing on the ground, and waits. There has been much speculation about what Jesus might have drawn or written, but if this had been important it would have been recorded in the Gospel. What is important is that He neither said nor did anything of consequence. He diverted His attention from everyone in the crowd, scribbled in the dust, and let truth have its devastating effect.

Then He is left alone with the woman. He asks a simple question: *“Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”* She gives a simple answer: *“No one, sir.”* In this question and answer a great truth is recognized, one that is a foundation of this study: Everyone sins and falls short of the glory of God. And so there was no one able to throw stones. In this simple exchange, a relationship of understanding and trust is established. From there, Jesus grants absolution and imparts commission, both in short, simple phrases: *“Then neither do I condemn you... Go now and leave your life of sin.”*

What a stark contrast to the Seven Woes denouncing the Scribes and Pharisees! There is nothing particularly tender or gentle in the way Jesus communicates truth in this example. He is fiery, confrontational, sarcastic, and quite funny. You can almost

see the wide eyes and hear the nervous laughter of the crowd as they witness a young man tear into the powerful religious establishment of the day like a lion into fresh meat. And this is not the only example of Jesus confronting these corrupt religious leaders and referring to them as a “brood of vipers.” This is perhaps Jesus’ pet name that He used on several occasions for these extraordinarily evil men.

Matthew 3:7 “But when he (*Jesus*) saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?’ ” (NIV)

Matthew 12:34 “You (*Pharisees*) brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.” (NASB)

To fully understand the “Seven Woes” passage from Matthew 23, it should be read in context. In the preceding chapter of Matthew, we see the Scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees repeatedly testing Jesus with questions, doing their best to trick Him into saying something that would allow them to silence and destroy Him. They fail over and over, until...

Matthew 22:46 “No one was able to answer Him a word, nor did anyone dare from that day on to ask Him another question.” (NASB)

Yet they continue to watch Jesus, looking for a way to accuse Him, and Jesus finally has enough and gives it to them with both barrels. How do we reconcile these two very different approaches?

Jesus tailored the content of His message and the style of His delivery to His audience. In both examples we are looking at, the audience included a gang of evil hypocrites and a crowd of people seeking truth. But in the first example there was an additional ingredient: A frightened woman in very real danger of being put to a painful, public death.

In some ways, the encounter with the Adulterous Woman was a one-on-one encounter with a humble heart, while the Seven Woes were addressed to a group of hardened hearts who were oppressing the other men and women who were present. In the exchange with the Adulterous Woman, after disbursing the Pharisees with a thunderbolt of truth, Jesus was exceedingly tender with a woman who knew she was sinful. Jesus was gentle with the Adulterous Woman because her humility allowed Him to be gentle with her. It is easy, appropriate, and delightful to be tender with a soft, open heart.

On the other hand, the Pharisees’ hearts were about as tender as hockey pucks. Years of self-righteous arrogance had hardened their hearts like petrified wood, and in the “Seven Woes” Jesus used fiery, vivid words to paint insightful portraits of the pain their stony hearts had inflicted on the men, women, and children they should

have been serving. He gave it to them like a left hook, not out of hatred or bitterness, but in an attempt to crack open calcified hearts and expose what lies underneath to the truth of what they had become. And this is what was appropriate (though not necessarily easy or delightful) given the nature of the Pharisees' hearts. Soft hearts befit tenderness. Hard hearts befit firmness. Sometimes, the shock value of fiery language is necessary to open the curtains in a dark place and let in the light. And sometimes, the most loving thing you can do to a snake is: Look it in the eye and call it a snake.

Speaking with love does not mean speaking without passion. We find the authors of the scriptures, under the divine inspiration of God's Spirit, writing with tremendous fervor and also with clear irritation, cutting sarcasm, and unequivocal firmness.

Titus 1:10-13 "For there are many rebellious people, full of meaningless talk and deception... They must be silenced, because they are disrupting whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach – and that for the sake of dishonest gain... rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith." (NIV)

Galatians 5:1-12 "... Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you... For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. 'A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.' I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view... As for those agitators (*who were spreading the lie that men must be circumcised to be saved*), I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!" (NIV)

1 Corinthians 4:14-21 "I (*Paul*) am writing this not to shame you but to warn you as my dear children... Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing... What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or shall I come in love and with a gentle spirit?" (NIV)

God gives each of us different temperaments that will manifest themselves in different styles of communication. Be who God made you to be. If you are quiet and soft-spoken, speak the truth in love. If you have a fiery personality, and listening to you talk is like trying to get a drink out of a fire hose, speak the truth in love.

However, "in your anger, do not sin." It is at times entirely appropriate to speak passionately to an obstinate person, but it is never appropriate to be hateful, mean-spirited, or self-righteous. Don't allow passion to slip into aggression, and words of truth to become lost in hateful speech. Instead, speak the truth in love.

Psalm 4:4 "In your anger do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

This is certainly an area where we must be extremely careful. The Seven Woes are not a license to go around insulting people in the name of Jesus. Jesus was the sinless God incarnate, and therefore He knew exactly when to be gentle and when to bust out the flamethrower. And Jesus did not always refer to the religious leaders of the day as reptiles. We can note that with the Adulterous Woman, Jesus did not expound on the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. He ignored them first, then dismissed them with a single, extraordinarily insightful challenge. And the Seven Woes were pronounced after prolonged attempts by the Scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees to trap Jesus, not after their first misguided effort.

Jesus used whatever language was appropriate given the totality of the circumstances, and His motivation was always love. After all, He would soon give His life for the “vipers” He was reproving. His intention was not to injure them, but to bring them to truth so they could receive eternal life. Our motivations should be identical. When our motivations are pure, God’s Spirit will empower us to speak the truth in love with the appropriate tenor and timbre.

Ephesians 4:1-32 “... live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love... to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it... So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work... put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. ‘In your anger do not sin’: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold... Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen... Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (NIV)

Speaking the truth in love takes guts. Most well-adjusted people do not enjoy conflict, and it requires great courage and conviction to take a stand and stand firm in a fallen world. Knowing how to truly stand and speak is a delicate art form that sometimes exacts a heavy price from the follower of Jesus. Where can we find the

inspiration to stand, speak, and color the world around us with truth and light, no matter what the consequences may be?

ART IS INSPIRED BY FAITH.

Where art (and life) begin.

Look behind the great works of art and you will find artists who passionately believed in something. They discovered a truth that moved them deeply, and inspired them (sometimes in the face of great adversity) to share their feelings through their given craft. Their passionate belief in their particular truth was their faith, which was in turn the inspiration for their art.

In a similar way, great lives are inspired by faith. It's faith that stirs conviction and courage. Faith motivates good decisions, even during difficult and dangerous circumstances. Faith is what guides and sustains us as we discover and fulfill God's plan and purpose for our lives. The "life that is truly life," the "abundant life" God so passionately desires each of us to experience and enjoy, begins with faith.

Romans 5:1,2 "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God." (NASB)

1 Timothy 6:12-19 "Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called... Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life." (NIV)

John 10:10 "... I (*Jesus*) came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (NASB)

Galatians 5:6 "... The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." (NIV)

The essence of faith: Trusting God to keep His Word.

What exactly is faith? The writer of Hebrews puts it this way:

Hebrews 11:1 "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

So faith is about "being sure" and "certain," of "what we hope for" and "do not see." Let's look first at surety and certainty. Being sure and certain requires trust. It requires confidence that something (or someone) is true. A person who is sure and certain is a person who is empowered by an unwavering belief or trust in some truth,

which imparts to him or her the qualities of assurance and conviction. The first ingredient of faith is therefore: Trust.

The second ingredient of faith is the object of trust; that is, what is trusted in, described in Hebrews 11:1 as “what we hope for” and “do not see.” When faith is called for, what is it we, as followers of Jesus, hope for but do not see? Isn’t it that God is keeping His Word? Isn’t it that God is faithful and in the process of honoring His promises, even if we can’t actually see Him doing anything? Isn’t the hope we stand upon in times of heartache and distress our belief that God will do what He has promised to do?

Deuteronomy 7:9 “Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations...” (NIV)

If we put these two ingredients together, we find that faith can be described as: *Trusting God to keep His Word*. Faith means that when the darkness falls and the night comes closing in, we trust that God will faithfully honor His promises, even if our eyes can’t see a thing. Faith is the sight that requires no light. It’s *trusting* God is keeping His Word, rather than *witnessing* Him do it.

Isaiah 50:10 “... Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on their God.” (NIV)

Micah 7:7,8 “But as for me, I will watch expectantly for the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me. Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy. Though I fall I will rise; though I dwell in darkness, the LORD is a light for me.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 5:7 “For we live by faith, not by sight.” (NIV)

In a sense, faith only exists in the darkness. If you can see God at work, if you can stand over His shoulder and observe every detail in the bright sunshine, where’s the faith in that? Where’s the conviction, courage, or trust? It’s nowhere, because you don’t trust those things you demand to see, you mistrust them. You lack confidence they will take place without your direct supervision, so you get out your calendar, schedule an appointment, and watch the other person like a hawk. When we stamp our feet and shake our fists and demand to witness God at His work, there is no trust, and when trust does not exist relationships are not developed.

True friendships are based upon trust. You don’t have to watch your friends keep a promise. You trust them to keep their word. In a very real sense, God wants a friendship with us, a relationship built around love and trust. Every time we trust God to keep His Word, our friendship with Him is deepened, like two soldiers who have been through a campaign together, growing closer and closer with each ensuing battle.

In Hebrews chapter 11, after defining faith in the first verse, the writer provides examples of faith in the lives of Old Testament believers: Noah builds an ark in anticipation of a coming flood... an elderly Abraham trusts he and his barren wife will one day have a baby... Moses rejects the privileges of Pharaoh's house in favor of a future reward. The chapter also speaks of faithful men and women willing to be imprisoned, tortured, and even put to death, because "the world was not worthy of them" (Hebrews 11:38). Each trusted God in a powerful way to keep His Word and grew exceedingly close to Him in the very heart of the darkness of a fallen world.

Psalm 23:1-6 "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." (NASB)

Hebrews 11:32-39 "And what more shall I say?... There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated – the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith..." (NIV)

The impossible.

In Hebrews 11, not only does the writer define faith and give us many examples of it, but also he describes, in the most fundamental terms, what we must believe in order to have faith:

Hebrews 11:6 "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." (NIV)

What a remarkable verse! There is a tremendous amount of extremely valuable information in this one sentence. First, we should note it is *impossible* to please God without faith. Not really difficult. Not improbable. Not highly unlikely. Impossible. We will never, ever please God, unless we have faith in Him.

The reverse of this is quite encouraging: Faith pleases God. God loves it when we trust Him! It means we're friends. We have a proven relationship established by trust that allows Him to pour out His blessing (and Joy and Peace) upon us as the children He loves. Faith is the key that unlocks the door to the consequences of

God's pleasure, and as we shall see (especially when we get to the Coda of this study), the consequences of God's pleasure are very, very desirable.

1 Corinthians 2:9 “but just as it is written, ‘THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.’ ” (NASB)

What we must believe in order to have faith.

We earnestly want to please God, and we know it is faith that pleases Him. But what exactly does that mean? Getting our arms around what it is to have faith can be difficult, especially when the skies suddenly darken and we find ourselves alone in an inky black, trying to stay calm, focus, and have faith. When we are surrounded by darkness, what must we believe in order to have faith?

Two things:

1. God exists; and
2. God rewards those who earnestly seek Him.

The writer of Hebrews makes it really simple for us. In order to have the faith that is pleasing to God, we must believe two basic things: God is there, and He cares.

Psalm 46:10,11 “... Be still, and know that I am God... The LORD Almighty is with us...” (NIV)

Psalm 46:1-3 “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains quake at its swelling pride.” (NASB)

Isaiah 43:1-5 “But now, this is what the LORD says – he who created you... he who formed you... ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior... Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you... Do not be afraid, for I am with you...’ ” (NIV)

We get scared in the dark because we fear we are alone and powerless. In stressful times, we worry that things will never get better, and no one will help us. We feel isolated and vulnerable.

As we trust in the existence of God and His goodwill towards us, darkness is stripped of its power. We are not alone, and we are not forsaken. God is right there beside us, even if we can't see Him, and He's not going anywhere. He loves us too much!

We may get a little pale, depending on how long God allows the darkness to last, but we will not be in the darkness forever, because we know with absolute certainty that eventually, God rewards those who earnestly seek Him. That's a clear, unequivocal promise, and we believe God keeps His promises. And at the end of the day, that's all we really need to know.

Psalm 62:1-12 “My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken... Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken. My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge... One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong, and that you, O Lord, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Psalm 73:23-28 “Nevertheless I am continually with You; You have taken hold of my right hand. With Your counsel You will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. For, behold, those who are far from You will perish... But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge...” (NASB)

1 Peter 5:6-10 “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings. And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.” (NIV)

The oldest questions: Does God exist and does God care?

The existence of God and the intentions of God are perhaps the two most ancient questions in all of history. It's something we've been arguing about since the beginning, and it will continue to be a source of contention until eternity begins. It's also important to recognize that how we answer these questions has a *profound* effect on our lives. They are two powerful hands that shape us at the most foundational level on the wheel of life.

So how do we know God is, and how do we know He cares? If faith requires us to believe God exists and He rewards those who earnestly seek Him, how can we be sure and certain what we hope for but do not see is true?

1. How we know God exists.

First a disclaimer. What follows is by no means intended to be an in-depth analysis of this extremely important question. To truly do this topic justice would require a volume in itself. Instead, we will look at the fundamental question and try to get to the heart of the matter. For those interested in more, there are a number of excellent books available that address this subject at length.

An interesting place to begin when tackling this question is with the recognition that, in the Bible, God never really stops and argues for His existence. You don't find any passages where God clears His throat and with a blackboard and chalk tries to convince His wayward sons and daughters of His paternity. It's almost as if God treats the question as so silly it doesn't even warrant a response.

Psalm 14:1 “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God..’ ” (NASB)

Consider this exchange between God and Moses, when God commissioned Moses to go and lead the people of Israel from the bondage of Egypt:

Exodus 3:13,14 “Moses said to God, ‘Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, “The God of your fathers has sent me to you,” and they ask me, “What is his name?” Then what shall I tell them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: “I AM has sent me to you.” ’ ” (NIV)

It's as if Moses knew the people of Israel, who had been suffering under the whip of slavery for centuries, would question the existence and intentions of God, and God heads that whole discussion off at the pass by declaring His very name to be “I Am.” Through His name, God assures the Israelites of His existence. By sending Moses to deliver them, He assures them He cares. And in identifying Himself as “I Am,” God is in a sense declaring He is life itself and the source of all other life, so if you are going to question His existence you might as well question your own.

That being said, we will look at several “witnesses,” each of whom testify to the existence of God:

- The testimony of the heart.
- The testimony of nature.
- The testimony of reason.
- The testimony of experience.
- The testimony of elimination.
- The testimony of Joy and Peace (or misery and despair).

The testimony of the heart. God doesn't have to debate His existence with His creation, because as the Creator of all He personally places the knowledge of His existence

directly in the center of every heart of every human being. We are formed with the knowledge of the existence and love of God imbedded in the central core of our being, and it is this knowledge that separates humanity from the rest of earthly creation.

Romans 1:19,20 “... that which is known about God is evident within them (*unrighteous men*); for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen... so that they are without excuse.” (NASB)

Psalms 36:1 “Transgression speaks to the ungodly within his heart...” (NASB)

This is what we described in Chapter 5 as “Common Grace,” the voice of God that is felt throughout all creation. The universal conviction we all share – that God is and God cares – is planted in our heart-of-hearts from birth, and as we mature from infants to children to adults, this seed grows and blooms within us and releases its fragrance. We begin to sense God’s existence the way we sense a nearby garden, by a sweet scent that becomes stronger and stronger as we close in on its source.

But we can never forget the mighty gift of freewill. As a person begins to sense the presence of God, he or she can choose to either follow the fragrance to where it originates, or to pinch the nose and turn away. We can seek the God whose presence we feel, or we can dull our senses and run from Him.

The first time you smell something from a distance, you don’t know quite what it is. You have to learn the smell, then keep sniffing and try to find its source, like a hound on the trail. You develop your sense of smell, until you can recognize the difference between an apple grove and an orange grove (and an open sewer), and go where you wish to go.

It’s kind of like that when we seek God. When we first become aware of Him, we’re not exactly sure what to think. We sense He exists. We sense He cares. But can we really trust Him? What’s He truly like? And if He actually does exist, what then are the implications of this discovery as it relates to how we will live our lives?

We should note that in addition to God’s existence and love there is another thing about Him we innately know from the very beginning, which is *extremely* important: He is greater than us. He is God, and therefore sovereign. To Him we owe our allegiance. He is in essence, the ultimate boss. And sometimes, that does not sit particularly well with us.

There is something about being human that makes rebellion as natural as breathing. Part of the human condition is that we are by nature “children of wrath,” born to wander and rebel, like sheep who refuse their shepherd. We sense the presence and love of God. We realize the implications if we seek Him. Then we are presented

with a choice: Do we follow the road that leads to Him, or do we turn aside and forge a path of our own choosing?

Ephesians 2:3-5 “... we... were by nature children of wrath... But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),” (NASB)

Isaiah 53:6 “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way...” (NIV)

Daniel 9:9 “The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him;” (NIV)

It’s at this fork in the road where destinies are made, and the determining factor is whether we will choose to be humble or proud. As we saw in Chapter 5, all human behavior is motivated by one of two things: Humility or Pride. We either humble ourselves before the God of all creation whose voice calls out to us, or we harden our hearts in prideful rebellion and embark upon a long journey inevitably leading to misery and despair.

The wonderful thing is: There is not only one, single fork in the road, and if we miss the turn we are not forever lost. God’s voice continually calls out to His creation, and there are many gracious opportunities along the journey of life to turn to Him. If we seek Him, we find Him, like children who catch the fragrance of a sweet-smelling grove and follow the trail through the forest until we enter the garden and discover the prize.

But if we continually choose the wrong path and in our pride refuse the call of God’s grace and love, then our hearts become hardened. Our sensitivity to God’s voice is dulled. We lose the ability to appreciate the fragrance of God that beckons us to Him, the way a runny nosed cocaine addict burns through his sinuses with the debilitating drug, then wonders why he can’t smell the roses in his garden.

If we never follow the path that leads to God, then we never discover what He is truly like. Without an accurate understanding of who God is and how He behaves, we can adopt any theory that suits our fancy and serves our arrogant purposes in order to justify rejecting God, including the belief that God does not exist or God is unknowable. The distortions of truth that can justify wrongful actions are practically endless.

Romans 1:18-32 “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are

without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man... Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions... receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness... and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.” (NASB)

2 Timothy 4:3,4 “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.” (NASB)

Prideful men and women finally lose the ability to sense God’s presence in their lives because they have destroyed through their own arrogance the part of themselves that is sensitive to Him. Their hearts are cold and calloused, which makes them deaf and blind to truth and light. They say there is no God the way a blind man might say there is no light, not because light does not exist, but because his eyes cannot see.

Ephesians 4:18,19 “They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Matthew 13:10-16 “The disciples came to him (*Jesus*) and asked, ‘Why do you speak to the people in parables?’ He replied... ‘This is why I speak to them in parables: “Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.” In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.” For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them. But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.’” (NIV)

God will gladly soften and heal the most brittle of hearts, but it takes a conscious decision to humbly turn to Him and seek the distant fragrance that touched the senses so long ago. Then the oils of God’s grace will sink into the leathery heart and

make it subtle and tender once more, like it was in the beginning, and the repentant heart will discover the great “I Am” whose only desire is to love and provide.

Ezekiel 18:21-32 “But if a wicked person turns away from all the sins they have committed... None of the offenses they have committed will be remembered against them... Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?... Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit... For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!” (NIV)

Isaiah 55:6-9 “Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. ‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the LORD. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’ ” (NIV)

Isaiah 57:15-18 “For this is what the high and exalted One says – he who lives forever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. I will not accuse them forever, nor will I always be angry, for then they would faint away because of me – the very people I have created... but I will heal them; I will guide them and restore comfort...’ ” (NIV)

2 Chronicles 34:27 “Because your heart was tender and you humbled yourself before God when you heard His words... and because you humbled yourself before Me... I truly have heard you,” declares the LORD.” (NASB)

The testimony of nature. A principal witness to the existence of God is the testimony of our own hearts. But there are many more “witnesses” that testify in God’s favor. The beauty and order of nature cry out that there is a God. It’s as if God put His fingerprints on our hearts, then said, “well, if the witness of your own heart isn’t enough, how about the stars?”

Psalms 19:1-6 “The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their utterances to the end of the world. In them He has placed a tent for the sun... and there is nothing hidden from its heat.” (NASB)

Psalms 97:6 “The heavens declare His righteousness, and all the peoples have seen His glory.” (NASB)

Psalms 8:1-9 “LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory in the heavens... When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care

for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet: all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild, the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas. LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (NIV)

On a dirty street, full of homeless adults and hungry children looking for shelter in derelict buildings, it’s easy to doubt the existence of God. But that’s because we have surrounded ourselves with the creation of mankind, not the creation of God. God did not design or create the concrete jungle or the shanty town. Man did. God created a clean, fruitful earth that, if well-tended, will abundantly provide food, clothing, and shelter for all. He then encased it with the sun, moon, and stars that, if thoughtfully regarded, will provide constant reminders of His majesty and grace. It’s not the world we were *graciously given* that causes us to doubt the existence of God. It’s the world we have *willfully created* that causes us to doubt the existence of God. And that is not the result of God’s actions (or inaction), but rather the product of the abuse of freewill.

Proverbs 19:3 “A person’s own folly leads to their ruin, yet their heart rages against the LORD.” (NIV)

God gave us an amazingly beautiful place in which to live. He begins each day with a sunrise and ends each day with a sunset. We have the sunshine, clouds, and rainbows to enjoy during the day, and the moon and stars at night. We hear the wind, rain, and waves. We smell the flowers, trees, and grass. We study the world around us and discover the immense complexity of everything from the expanding universe, to the miraculous human body, to the uniqueness of each individual snowflake. And some of our greatest minds devote their entire lives to explaining how the God of the Bible had nothing to do with it.

Mankind goes to extraordinary lengths to try and find some semblance of meaning in life without dependence upon a holy, loving God, and to justify willful, bad decisions. Perhaps the most extraordinary length of all is to hold that the beauty and complexity of creation is the result of an astrophysical anomaly, or the result of a “divine force” with the power to create but not the will to be a real and immediate part of the lives of its creation. It’s beyond the scope of this work to explore whether the biblical account of creation and modern scientific theory can be reconciled (which, in case you are wondering, they can), but we would all be well served to get away from the things of man – go sit on a beach or hike into the mountains or spend some time alone looking up at the stars – and then honestly consider in our heart-of-hearts whether we could ever truly accept that all of this is the result of some sort of great cosmological random event.

Colossians 2:2-8 “... be encouraged... attaining to all the wealth that comes from full assurance of understanding... so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument... See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.” (NASB)

But this is exactly the “truth” that many would ask us to accept and build a happy life upon. No Creator, only creation. No cause, only effect. No plan or purpose, only the cards we are dealt. No heaven or hell, only the grave. Material things, random events, and a tombstone – not much to build a life upon. In fact, it’s nothing to build a life upon. If this is truth, the only logical conclusion to reach is: You’re on your own, do your best, then die. The voice of God inside of us, and the evidence of God’s presence and love outside of us (expressed in the beauty and complexity of nature), comfort us with the truth there is something much more and something much better to life than that.

Testimony of reason. Atheism, the belief there is no God, flies in the face of simple reason. Creation requires a Creator. Something cannot come from nothing. There is no effect without a cause. The existence of the universe demands the existence of God.

Similarly, Agnosticism makes no sense. Agnosticism holds the existence of God can be neither proved nor disproved, which is tantamount to believing God is unknowable. He may or may not exist, but even if He does, He does not reveal enough about Himself for us to draw a reasonable conclusion as to whether He actually exists or cares.

But what kind of God is that? What kind of God would go to the trouble of creating the heavens and the earth, and then turn around and hide from its inhabitants? What could possibly be the purpose of that? This belief requires a God so distant from His creation as to be irrelevant. We condemn earthly fathers who abandon their children. How much worse for a God to abandon all creation?

It’s simply unthinkable that the God who formed the universe would not also reveal Himself to His creation. And not “reveal himself” in the limited sense of some vague notion that He’s out there somewhere and everything’s going to be alright somehow, but in the *unlimited* sense that He will with great delight show us who He is and what He is like and what He is doing in individual lives and in all of creation and why, because He loves us and wants to have a relationship with us that is real and alive. How could it be that a God with the power to create the universe would lack the will to care for it? It makes absolutely no sense, unless you want to try to convince yourself that God is irresponsible or evil. Yet we all know there has to be something more and better than that.

When we glom on to the ideas God doesn't exist or exists but is unknowable, it's usually not because we truly believe these things. It's usually because deep down inside we don't actually like the ramifications of the ideas God exists and has a plan and a purpose for our lives. If He is and He cares, then we in turn must trust and obey, and when pride controls our decisions we have no intention of either trusting or obeying anyone or anything. It's much more desirable to just tell ourselves that God, if He is even out there, is just too far out there to ever get to know.

Acts 17:26-28 “and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth... that they would seek God... and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist...” (NASB)

Another reason we profess atheism or agnosticism is that we are just plain mad at God. We suffer some form of hurt – an injury, injustice, loss, or genuine trauma – and we become so angry at God for letting it happen we decide to hurt Him back by denying His existence or questioning His love. Many times these feelings spring from legitimately painful events, and they run very deep. On the surface our minds might never admit we are angry with God, and instead we label Him a fairytale because it (temporarily) makes it easier to deal with the pain. But deep down inside in our heart-of-hearts we know He is and He cares; we just can't come to terms with the fact He allowed us to be hurt. It then takes a very humble heart to seek answers from the God we feel betrayed us. This is a difficult subject we will look at in more detail later in this study.

Psalm 22:1,2 “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest.” (NIV)

Psalm 30:1-12 “... LORD... you lifted me out of the depths... I called to you for help, and you healed me... Sing the praises of the LORD, you his faithful people; praise his holy name... weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning... To you, LORD, I called; to the Lord I cried for mercy... You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. LORD my God, I will praise you forever.” (NIV)

Psalm 126:5,6 “Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.” (NIV)

1 Peter 4:19 “Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

Jude 1:22 “Be merciful to those who doubt;” (NIV)

The fact that the vast majority of humanity shares the same concept of right and wrong argues for the existence of God. Everyone knows it's wrong to lie, steal, rape, and kill. That doesn't keep us from doing it, but no one engages in these activities

with a clear conscience. Eventually, it makes us feel guilty for what we've done, and only God could make that universal in all humanity.

**1 Timothy 1:18,19 "... fight the good fight, keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith."
(NASB)**

There are many more of these kinds of common sense arguments. It all boils down to this: It is simply unreasonable to believe life came from nowhere. The proposition "from nothing, everything" is utterly foolish. If there is no God, then how did we get here? God exists, because we exist. There can be no other reasonable explanation.

Testimony of experience. Another witness to the existence of God is our own personal experiences with Him through the changing circumstances of our lives. God is at work in every person's life, and (if our hearts are humble) we see Him at work in the twists and turns that affect the course of our existence.

Nearly everyone who has lived for very long has had some experience that cannot be explained by logic or chance. It might be a person, place, or thing, but someone or something comes into our lives at a critical moment and points us in a new, important direction. The hard of heart try to find some logical explanation, or they call it fate or chance. But the humble of heart see the hand of God guiding them along the "narrow road that leads to life."

Matthew 7:13,14 "... wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." (NIV)

Sometimes we don't recognize these experiences when they are happening, and it's only with the passage of time that we can look back and appreciate the profound impact certain events had on our lives. But as we grow older and gain a perspective on the journey of life, we see the clear influence of the hand of God guiding our path, and our faith in Him is confirmed and strengthened. We see where God has been there for us, graciously providing everything we need in both good times and bad. Not that God has always given us everything we ask for like a genie in a bottle, but God's grace has always been sufficient to empower us to accomplish His will and to know Joy and Peace. Through our life experiences we have a "history" with God that makes us sure and certain of His existence and love.

Psalms 116:1-7 "I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live... The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion... when I was in great need, he saved me. Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the LORD has been good to you." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Psalm 107:2-43 “Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story... they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way... Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind, for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things... they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness, the utter darkness, and broke away their chains. Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds... tell of his works with songs of joy... Let the one who is wise heed these things and ponder the loving deeds of the LORD.” (NIV)

Testimony of elimination. Another witness whose voice grows clearer and louder with the passage of time is the witness of elimination. We go through life and knock on a lot of different doors, searching for something that will provide meaning and significance, or at least a relief from the emptiness we feel inside. And as we make the rounds, going from door to door, possibilities are eliminated one by one.

We try materialism, and eventually discover that all the fame and fortune in all the world cannot make us happy. Neither can drugs, alcohol, promiscuous sex, nor power. When the material things of this world fail to satisfy, it's only natural that we start to look outside the world to spiritual things, and this will lead a humble heart to God.

Ecclesiastes 2:1-20 “*I (Solomon, perhaps the most powerful and wealthy man who ever lived)* said to myself, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.’ But that also proved to be meaningless... what does pleasure accomplish? I tried cheering myself with wine... I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards... I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well – the delights of a man’s heart... I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor... Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun. Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom... Then I said to myself... ‘What then do I gain by being wise?... This too is meaningless.’ So I hated life... All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for... So my heart began to despair...” (NIV)

Psalm 73:1-28 “Surely God is good to... those who are pure in heart! But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling... until I came into the sanctuary of God... When my heart was embittered and I was pierced within, then I was senseless and ignorant. I was like a beast before You. Nevertheless I am continually with You; You have taken hold of my right hand. With Your counsel You will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart

may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever... as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all Your works.” (NASB)

A prideful heart can also look for God, and this sometimes leads to (what we labeled in Chapter 5 as) “false religion,” a counterfeit relationship with God that is not based upon the truth of His Word. As with materialism, this ultimately leaves us empty because we inevitably find that the god we were trying to worship was nothing more than a creation of man intended to facilitate bad decisions. We weren’t worshipping the Creator. We were worshipping our own creation as a means to justify prideful actions. The inescapable result is disillusionment and unhappiness. And so, as with materialism, this option is eliminated.

Isaiah 29:13 “The Lord says: ‘These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.’ ” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

2 Timothy 4:3,4 “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.” (NASB)

Romans 1:24,25 “Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts... For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.” (NASB)

We can also try on all of the different philosophical teachings the world can design, but we still fail to find the Peace and satisfaction for which we long. While certain philosophies contain an element of truth in their insights into human nature, all secular philosophies ultimately fail to satisfy because they are missing the one thing that can lift mankind up from the sea of loneliness that engulfs a fallen world: The grace of a holy, loving God.

Colossians 2:2-23 “... be encouraged... attaining to all the wealth that comes from full assurance of understanding... so that no one may delude you with persuasive argument... See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ... Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize... These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom... but are of no value...” (NASB)

God kicks all the separate pairs of crutches out from under us, until there is no alternative left except the truth. If we prop ourselves up with materialism, He allows its emptiness to knock us back down. If we run to false religion, He allows its lies to trip us up. If we cling to secular philosophy, He allows its fragile thread to break. With no crutches left, as we lie bruised and bloodied on the ground staring up at the

sky, we can only draw one of two conclusions. Of these two conclusions, one is the lie that leads to death and the other is the truth that leads to life.

The first conclusion is the lie, and it goes something like this: If there is no God, or if God is uncaring or unknowable, and if there is nothing within this world that can truly satisfy, then nothing matters. There is no good or bad, reward or retribution, only temporary distractions from misery that ultimately fail to numb the pain until there is nothing left but loneliness and despair. Life is meaningless and not worth living. This is the path prideful hearts follow to evil actions, the death of the human spirit, and all too often to suicide.

Proverbs 16:25 “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.” (NASB)

A humble heart that is open to the voice of God knows this conclusion is unthinkable. It has to be a lie. There is no way this dark, desperate end can be true when we consider all we see around us and all we feel inside us. So there must be another, inescapable conclusion that is the truth: God is and God loves, I simply haven't humbly sought or embraced Him yet.

In many ways, humility is: The ability to accept blame. Instead of blaming others (especially God) or relying on endless excuses for failure, we are able to find fault in ourselves, and when we do, we are then liberated to seek and embrace truth. We can learn from failures and value the lessons they teach. We can forgive ourselves and others. And as all of this is taking place, truth and light pour into our hearts and we discover life does not have to be a dark and lonely place. It can be full of beauty and illumination, when all the misleading doors are eliminated and the door to the holy, loving God is flung open and leapt through. If we humbly seek God we invariably find Him, and when we find Him we find “the life that is truly life.”

Jeremiah 29:13 “You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.” (NASB)

1 Chronicles 28:9 “... serve Him with a whole heart and a willing mind; for the LORD searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will reject you...” (NASB)

1 Timothy 6:3-19 “If anyone teaches false doctrines... he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth... But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses... Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In

this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Testimony of Joy and Peace (or misery and despair). Perhaps the most powerful testimony for the existence of God is this: When we seek and find Him, and then choose to walk humbly by His side, our hearts finally know Joy and Peace. The unrelenting loneliness that burdened us before is gone, and the empty place is filled with Joy “inexpressible” and Peace “surpassing comprehension.” We know with surety and certainty God is real and He cares for us, because when we do what He says we find true happiness. The undeniable evidence is the undeniable *change* in our lives. God is real, because the Joy and Peace He provides are real. We know God is, because when we do what He says, we’re happy.

Psalm 89:15-17 “Blessed are those who have learned to... walk in the light of your presence, LORD. They rejoice in your name all day long; they celebrate your righteousness. For you are their glory and strength...” (NIV)

Proverbs 3:13-26 “Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed... My son, do not let wisdom and understanding out of your sight, preserve sound judgment and discretion; they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck. Then you will go on your way in safety, and your foot will not stumble. When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, for the LORD will be at your side and will keep your foot from being snared.” (NIV)

Romans 2:9-11 “There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil... but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good... For there is no partiality with God.” (NASB)

The opposite of this, and an equally powerful witness, is that when we forsake God and go our own way we inevitably find misery and despair. It might take a little while for us to realize it as we indulge ourselves in the temporary distractions this world has to offer, but the end result is always the same. The distractions wear off and finally become impotent, and we are left desperate and alone. A life without the holy, loving God is empty and unsatisfying, with only one possible outcome: A sad, lonely heart.

Job 20:4-8 “Surely you know how it has been from of old, ever since mankind was placed on the earth, that the mirth of the wicked is brief, the joy of the godless lasts but a moment. Though the pride of the godless person reaches to the heavens and his head touches the clouds, he will perish forever, like his own

ding; those who have seen him will say, 'Where is he?' Like a dream he flies away, no more to be found, banished like a vision of the night." (NIV)

Ecclesiastes 2:1-20 "I (*Solomon, perhaps the most powerful and wealthy man to ever live*) said to myself, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.' But that also proved to be meaningless... what does pleasure accomplish? I tried cheering myself with wine... I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards... I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well – the delights of a man's heart... I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor... Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun. Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom... Then I said to myself... 'What then do I gain by being wise?... This too is meaningless.' So I hated life... All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for... So my heart began to despair..." (NIV)

Isaiah 57:20,21 "But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. 'There is no peace,' says my God, 'for the wicked.'" (NIV)

Isaiah 59:8 "... They have made their paths crooked, whoever treads on them does not know peace." (NASB)

This testimony is in a sense the culmination of all of the other witnesses we've already considered. It's what they all lead to. In our heart-of-hearts we know God exists and loves His creation. He places this knowledge there at our birth. The beauty and complexity of nature confirm this sense, as does our ability to reason, and as we live our lives God continues to reveal Himself in our experiences through our changing circumstances. We may or may not be sensitive to what God is doing in our lives, depending on whether our hearts are humble or proud, but as we continue down the road of life, God (because He loves us) will kick every crutch out from under us, eliminating every possible bad option and false conclusion, until we are left with only two choices: To humbly seek the God we know must exist and love us, or to arrogantly reject Him and follow our own ruinous path. If we seek Him, we find Joy and Peace, and this provides us with assurance we have made the right decision. If we reject Him, we find loneliness and despair, and our own self-induced misery condemns our choices to forsake the God whose existence and love were known from the start.

God has a way of humbling every human heart. We might for a time wholeheartedly devote ourselves to any number of false teachings, but in the end, God upholds truth. The emptiness of the things of this world catch up with us sooner or later, until we are caught in the headlights of God's true nature. We then have a choice to either embrace the truth or be run over by it. Either way, it is the inescapable conclusion of every human being that God is and God loves.

Obadiah 1:3,4 “The arrogance of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rock, in the loftiness of your dwelling place, who say in your heart, “Who will bring me down to earth?” Though you build high like the eagle, though you set your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down,’ declares the Lord.” (NASB)

Romans 14:10-12 “... For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, ‘AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LORD, EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW TO ME, AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL GIVE PRAISE TO GOD.’ So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God.” (NASB)

Philippians 2:9-11 “Therefore God exalted him (*Jesus*) to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (NIV)

Adverse testimony. Let’s take a moment and examine a few of the arguments *against* the existence of a holy, loving God. Perhaps the star witness for the opposition is the presence of injustice, suffering, and evil in the world. We see images of starving children in impoverished nations and wonder: How could a loving God allow this to be? God must either not exist, or He must not care.

But it is not God’s will for an innocent child to go hungry, nor are any of the other examples of evil and injustice in the world the result of what God desires for His creation. Instead, these things are the result of mankind’s choices. Sticking with the previous example, God gave us a clean, fruitful world in which to live that will easily feed everyone in it if cared for responsibly. With a little common sense and planning, there is not a child on planet earth who should go hungry during the most severe drought or at any other time.

We are all deeply moved by images of starving children (as we should be), but we have no reason to rail against God for their plight. Look deeper, and ultimately you will find the cause of the child’s anguish is not a seasonal drought God callously failed to end, but rather corrupt governments abandoning their responsibility to the people they govern, sometimes even using starvation as a weapon. The only way for God to prevent that is to strip mankind of the freedom to choose, and as we have seen many times, that is not a part of God’s plan and purpose for human history.

One of the major themes throughout this work has been the dramatic and far-reaching effect the gift of freewill has had upon the world in which we live. It is the reason the world is fallen. Humanity has been granted the freedom to choose between right and wrong, and the shockwaves that ripple throughout human history as a result cannot be overemphasized.

We have freedom individually as men and women, and we also have freedom collectively as a species. As individuals we make our beds and lie in them, and as

cultures we do the same. The inevitable result is that sometimes good people are going to suffer while bad people are going to prosper. The presence of evil in the world is indeed the litmus test for the existence of freewill. The innocent blood that stains the fallen world is undeniable evidence we are truly free.

What it is not is undeniable evidence God does not exist or care. It simply means God grants us the freedom to choose, and then to live according to the consequences of our decisions. We have to live in the world we freely create.

Someone might say: Alright then, it's fine to say as a matter of principle that evil exists because of freewill. Nice theory. But let's take this out of the theoretical realm and bring it down into the real world. As a practical matter, how is the person suffering and even dying at the hands of evil supposed to believe there is a holy, loving God? God might not be *causing* the evil, but He sure is *allowing* it. How can He allow it and still claim to be holy and loving?

God can be holy and loving and still allow evil in the world because at the end of the day, when it's all said and done: God is just and God is not mocked. He will ultimately dispense justice in the world, and we will reap exactly what we sow. God has given us His unbreakable Word that those who sow evil will reap evil, and those who sow goodness will reap goodness. This especially includes the innocent person who suffers at the hands of evil.

Galatians 6:7-10 “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Hebrews 10:22-36 “let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings... Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful... Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.” (NIV)

We are granted this little time on earth to make our choices. Sometimes we suffer from the evil of others. Sometimes others suffer from the evil we create. Ultimately, God will set all things to absolute, uncontestable right.

How? It depends on how you want to look at it – from “without” or “within.” First, let’s look at the question from “without;” that is, from the perspective of an outsider who observes an injustice taking place in the world. From this point of view, *sometimes, God brings judgment to earth.* He punishes the wicked and He rewards the good in spectacular, visible ways. *Other times, God reserves judgment on earth* and waits for eternity. Evil people (and evil societies) are allowed to live to a ripe old age, and judgment does not come until after their deaths. Similarly, the lives of good people and societies are sometimes cut short or never recognized while here on earth, and rewards are not bestowed until eternity begins. It all depends on the part God calls each of us to play in the great drama of human history. *Either way, one thing is certain: Judgment is inevitable.* Eventually, whether in this life or in the next, the evil are punished and the good are rewarded. And not punished and rewarded just a little bit, but punished and rewarded a lot. More on this in the Coda at the end of this work.

Ecclesiastes 7:15 “I (Solomon) have seen everything during my lifetime of futility; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his wickedness.” (NASB)

Psalm 145:3,20 “Great is the LORD, and highly to be praised; and His greatness in unsearchable... The LORD keeps all who love Him; but all the wicked, He will destroy.” (NASB)

Job 24:13-25 “There are those who rebel against the light, who do not know its ways or stay in its paths. When daylight is gone, the murderer rises up, kills the poor and needy, and in the night steals forth like a thief. The eye of the adulterer watches for dusk; he thinks, ‘No eye will see me,’ and he keeps his face concealed. In the dark, thieves break into houses, but by day they shut themselves in; they want nothing to do with the light. For all of them, midnight is their morning; they make friends with the terrors of darkness. Yet they are foam on the surface of the water... As heat and drought snatch away the melted snow, so the grave snatches away those who have sinned. The womb forgets them, the worm feasts on them; the wicked are no longer remembered but are broken like a tree. They prey on the barren and childless woman, and to the widow they show no kindness. But God drags away the mighty by his power; though they become established, they have no assurance of life. He may let them rest in a feeling of security, but his eyes are on their ways. For a little while they are exalted, and then they are gone; they are brought low and gathered up like all others; they are cut off like heads of grain. If this is not so, who can prove me false and reduce my words to nothing?” (NIV)

Isaiah 2:12-22 “For the LORD of hosts will have a day of reckoning against everyone who is proud and lofty, and against everyone who is lifted up, that he may be abased... The pride of man will be humbled, and the loftiness of men will be abased, and the LORD alone will be exalted in that day... Men will go into caves of the rocks, and into holes of the ground before the terror of the LORD, and before the splendor of His majesty, when He arises to make the earth tremble... Stop regarding man, whose breath of life is in his nostrils; for why should he be esteemed?” (NASB)

Matthew 19:28-30 “Jesus said to them, ‘I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne... everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.’ ” (NIV)

Revelation 7:17 “for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 2:9 “but just as it is written, ‘THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.’ ” (NASB)

Now let’s look at the question from “within;” that is, from the perspective of an insider who has either caused or suffered an injustice. From this point of view, *judgment is always immediate*. How so? Without exception, everyone who commits evil loses all semblance of Joy and Peace within themselves and immediately receives a seed of misery and self-loathing that begins to grow within them like a cancer. The more evil, the more misery, until life becomes unbearable. In the world’s eyes, they might be leaders of mighty nations with every conceivable luxury and vice at their fingertips, but in truth they have “gained the world and forfeited their soul,” or said another way, they have gained misery and despair and forfeited Joy and Peace. Those who do evil are absolutely wretched, miserable creatures who are not to be envied, even if they are living in the lap of the fallen world’s luxury.

Psalms 37:1-11 “Do not fret because of evildoers, be not envious toward wrongdoers. For they will wither quickly like the grass and fade... Trust in the LORD and do good... Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He will do it. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light and your judgment as the noonday. Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him; do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, because of the man who carries out wicked schemes. Cease from anger and forsake wrath; do not fret; it leads only to evildoing. For evildoers will be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD, they will inherit the land. Yet a little while and the wicked man will be no more; and you will look carefully for his place and he will not be there. But the humble will inherit the land and will delight themselves in abundant prosperity.” (NASB)

Isaiah 57:20,21 “But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. ‘There is no peace,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked.’ ” (NIV)

Job 20:4-8 “Surely you know how it has been from of old, ever since mankind was placed on the earth, that the mirth of the wicked is brief, the joy of the godless lasts but a moment. Though the pride of the godless person reaches to the heavens and his head touches the clouds, he will perish forever, like his own

ding; those who have seen him will say, 'Where is he?' Like a dream he flies away, no more to be found, banished like a vision of the night." (NIV)

Jeremiah 17:11 "Like a partridge that hatches eggs it did not lay are those who gain riches by unjust means. When their lives are half gone, their riches will desert them, and in the end they will prove to be fools." (NIV)

For the one who does good, judgment is also immediate. When we walk humbly with God, loving God and mankind the way Jesus loved God and mankind, we know Joy and Peace even (and sometimes especially) during suffering. In the world's eyes our lives may look like disasters, but in truth we are able to endure the "flaming arrows" of evil and know Joy "inexpressible" and Peace "surpassing comprehension" regardless of our circumstances.

Romans 2:9-11 "There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil... but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good... For there is no partiality with God." (NASB)

Ephesians 6:10-16 "... be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might... take up the full armor of God, so that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm... in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one." (NASB)

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." (NIV)

2 Corinthians 6:1-10 "... we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain... but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses... in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love, in the word of truth, in the power of God... as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things." (NASB)

2 Corinthians 7:4 "... in all our troubles my (*Paul's*) joy knows no bounds." (NIV)

Habakkuk 3:17-19 "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength..." (NIV)

God allows evil in the world as the inevitable byproduct of freewill, but He also administers justice in a fallen world as the inevitable byproduct of who He is: The sovereign, righteous, holy God of all creation. This makes everything fair. We are free to choose, but we are also held accountable for our decisions by God Himself. *From without, justice is imminent*, inevitably coming either in this life or in the next in the forms of reward or punishment. *From within, justice is immediate*, coming without delay

in the forms of misery and despair to those who do evil and Joy and Peace to those who do good.

Colossians 3:25 “For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality.” (NASB)

Proverbs 16:4-20 “The LORD works out everything to its proper end – even the wicked for a day of disaster. The LORD detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished... blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD.” (NIV)

Proverbs 12:20 “Deceit is in the heart of those who devise evil, but counselors of peace have joy.” (NASB)

The fallen world will say this explanation is a massive cop out, an easy answer to give and a hard answer to swallow when we’ve been wronged. It argues this kind of justice is just too slow and speculative. We need something more to hang our hats on to bring us true satisfaction and comfort. It says: “By golly if God is up there on His throne then He needs to get down here now, get with it, and start smiting people pronto, or He must not be up there at all. If He really exists and cares, He wouldn’t let this happen.”

But our answer is the *only* answer compatible with freewill. The alternative is for God to swoop down and pummel every injustice as it occurs, and that would make for a very staccato delivery of the drama of human history. We would get smacked so often and so regularly, who could really say what the impact would be on the human psyche? Would we really choose judgment that is swift and sure for everyone, including ourselves, if we could really have it? If God truly did meet out discipline immediately upon every wrongdoing, human nature being what it is, we most likely would all be screaming at the top of our lungs that God is way too harsh and much too extreme, never granting us reasonable time to right the wrongs we sometimes commit.

God allows our freewill to play out its part for the brief time we are on the stage of human history without interruption, then one day gives each of us an honest and fair review along with eternal rewards or punishments. And the Joy and Peace we can experience during our life on the stage are of such potency and power they will emphatically compensate for the injustices we experience within a fallen world, if we will “hold on to the good” and “be kept blameless” until we meet our Savior face-to-face.

1 Thessalonians 5:5-28 “You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled... since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that...

we may live together with Him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up... Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus... Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil... May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and He will do it... The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

1 Corinthians 4:5 "Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God." (NASB)

Now let's look at an even more difficult example of injustice in the world. What about an innocent child suffering from a terminal illness? Maybe we can accept that a hungry child is the fault of irresponsible adults, but who is responsible for a child who gets cancer? Couldn't God, if He existed and cared, stop this? Shouldn't He? Even if He didn't cause it, how can He allow it and still call Himself God?

When sin entered the world, so did disease and death. And as part of the weight of sin pressing down upon the fallen world, these terrible things sometimes visit the most undeserving men and women, and even boys and girls. Perhaps nothing is more heartbreaking than a terminally ill child.

Romans 5:12 "... through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men..." (NASB)

1 Corinthians 15:22 "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive." (NASB)

Romans 8:18-28 "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration... in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently... And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (NIV)

But how can we expect God to prevent this and still allow freewill to be free? Does He impose a rule upon nature that only bad people get sick and die? Or disease can

only afflict those over a certain age? How could this be and still allow the drama of life to unfold?

To impose these types of rigid rules (where only bad people suffer, and only good people prosper, and children are safe from all dangers until they become adults) strips the world of the one thing that matters: Faith. There could be no testing, no growth, no service, and no development of relationship. Only a *quid pro quo* between Creator and creation based upon strict adherence to contractual duties.

Galatians 5:6 “... The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” (NIV)

God reserves His right as the sovereign Lord of all creation to heal the sick (whether through medicine or on His own), or to bring His children home through the doors of death, all depending upon His all-encompassing plan and purpose for individual lives and all creation. Sometimes, this can be unspeakably difficult to accept, and our natural impulse is quite understandably to shake our fists and through our tears deny the existence of a holy, loving God.

But we can never forget that there is *so much more* to our lives than just this brief time we spend on planet earth. If God calls someone home, we have the unbreakable, flawless Word of the God of truth that there is a good, worthy reason for our loss (even if we can't fathom it). And we have God's promise that the person who loves Him has been lifted from death into the arms of a holy, loving God, who will welcome him or her into the glory of eternity.

John 11:25 “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies,’ ” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 15:52-58 “... the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed... this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, ‘DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP IN VICTORY. O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?’... thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.” (NASB)

John 10:28,29 “and I (*Jesus*) give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.” (NASB)

Romans 8:38,39 “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NIV)

Hebrews 7:25 “Therefore He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him...” (NASB)

Psalm 33:11 “But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations.” (NIV)

Isaiah 14:24 “The LORD Almighty has sworn, ‘Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will happen.’ ” (NIV)

Hebrews 6:17-19 “... God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear... it is impossible for God to lie... we have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure...” (NIV)

1 Peter 4:19 “Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

And for those men and women and boys and girls whose lives are cut inexplicably short, while we must suffer their loss for the remainder of our days, they have in truth suffered no loss. The Joy and Peace they may have missed on earth had they lived a full life is *absolutely nothing* compared to the Joy and Peace of just one second in God’s presence, and the Joy and Peace to come when we are all gathered together with our Lord and Savior. God knows exactly what each individual would have done with their lives had they lived to be a hundred (including children who pass away), and He will reward them accordingly in eternity. God is holy. And God is love. He can act no other way.

Philippians 1:21 “... to live is Christ and to die is gain.” (NIV)

Ephesians 3:14-21 “For this reason, I (*Paul*) bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.” (NASB)

Jude 1:24,25 “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.” (NASB)

God’s Word tells us there are certain people of such purity of character “the world is not worthy of them,” and sometimes, for whatever reason, God calls them home early. It’s as if there is no need for them to be tested by the trials and tribulations of this life, and they are brought into the presence of God sooner rather than later, to begin an eternity of indescribable Joy and Peace.

Hebrews 11:5-38 “By faith Enoch was taken from this life (*at an early age*)... For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God... And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about... the prophets, who through faith

conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised... There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated – the world was not worthy of them..." (NIV)

This may be, perhaps, one reason God allows certain lives to be cut short. They were simply too good for this place, and there was no reason for them to endure the tests inherent in living out life in a fallen world. God knows they would have passed every test, and instead of putting them through the ordeal He just scoops them up, brings them home, and starts passing out the rewards. For those of us left behind, it is a great (though temporary) loss, and an extraordinarily difficult test of our faith, until we join our loved ones in heaven and take our place in the celebration. For those entering the presence of God, it is glorious beyond description.

Isaiah 57:1,2 "The righteous perish, and no one takes it to heart; the devout are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil. Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death." (NIV)

2 Corinthians 4:17,18 "For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal." (NIV)

Romans 8:18 "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us." (NASB)

Revelation 21:3,4 "... God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." (NASB)

Another series of objections to the existence of God has to do with mortality and the nature of life on planet earth. If there is a God, then why did He stick us in these mortal bodies that get sick and die? And while we're asking questions, why did He strand us on this planet, with floods and flies, freezing winters and burning summers? Why aren't we born in heaven with God, or why doesn't He at least appear and explain all these things in person, or maybe perform a miracle or two to help us believe?

To fully answer these provocative and worthy questions would require an in-depth study of the biblical accounts of creation, angelic beings, the fall of mankind in the Garden of Eden, "Dispensations" (the changes in the manner through which God reveals Himself to mankind throughout history), and most of the book of Revelation. All that is obviously beyond the scope of this work. The answers are in the Bible,

and as you humbly seek them, you will find them. In the meantime, here are a few basic points to consider...

- ❖ When God originally created mankind, our bodies were perfect. It was only after sin entered the world that mankind became susceptible to disease and subject to death. Mortality is therefore the result of humanity's rebellion, not God's original design.
- ❖ Similarly, God created the earth as an Eden and walked with us in the Garden. It was our sin that turned it into what we complain about today.
- ❖ We think if God appeared to us personally it would be easier to have faith in Him. God's Word tells us this is simply not true. There are many accounts of people who had one-on-one encounters with God in the Bible. Some of them had faith, and some of them didn't. Whether truth is communicated directly through God Himself, or through His written Word, or through His servants, is not what makes the difference. What makes the difference is how we freely choose to respond to truth, however it is communicated.
- ❖ We long for signs and miracles to strengthen our faith, but Jesus said only "a wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign" (Matthew 16:4). God has tried miracles with mankind on many occasions, and they never really made any long-term difference. The Exodus generation had miracles literally every day for 40 years, and they were one of the most rebellious generations in all of human history (Exodus 7-20,32,34; Leviticus 10; Numbers 11-17,20,21; Deuteronomy 5,9; Psalm 78,106). Jesus healed ten lepers, but only one came back to worship Him (Luke 17). At the end of the day, it's not the sign or miracle people respond to or reject. It is the truth that underlies them. If we are full of pride and intent on rebelling, God can appear personally and part a sea for us, and it won't matter one tiny bit. But if we are humble of heart and intent on following God's leading, we don't have to see Him or witness His miracles. The truth of His Word and the power of His Spirit are more than enough.
- ❖ If you look long and hard enough, you will find within the pages of the Bible whatever advantage you are longing for that you think would make faith easier, and you will eventually discover that the advantage is, at the end of the day, meaningless. Someone (either human or angelic) enjoyed it, and it didn't matter. What mattered was how the individual freely chose to respond to truth. It was the only thing that mattered to them then, and it is the only thing that matters to us now.

Matthew 16:1-4 "The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. He replied, "... a wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign..." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Psalm 78:32 “In spite of all this, they (*the Exodus generation, who witnessed miracles every day for 40 years*) kept on sinning; in spite of his wonders, they did not believe.” (NIV)

Ezekiel 28:12-17 “You (*Satan*) were the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you: carnelian, chrysolite and emerald, topaz, onyx and jasper, lapis lazuli, turquoise and beryl. Your settings and mountings were made of gold; on the day you were created they were prepared. You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you. Through your widespread trade you were filled with violence, and you sinned. So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God, and I expelled you, guardian cherub, from among the fiery stones. Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor. So I threw you to the earth...” (NIV)

Isaiah 14:12-15 “How you (*Satan*) have fallen from heaven, morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth... You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.’ But you are brought down to the realm of the dead, to the depths of the pit.” (NIV)

Luke 16:19-31 “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’ But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’ He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’ ‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’” (NIV)

John 20:24-29 “Now Thomas... one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came (*after the resurrection*). So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord!’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.’ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among

them and said, 'Peace be with you!' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.' Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!' Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.' ” (NIV)

We should take a moment and look quickly at how these principles apply to witnessing to the lost. Many times we meet an atheist or agnostic and try so hard to convert them with clever arguments, passionate speeches, and sometimes, thinly veiled threats about hell. But God's Word actually never instructs us to "convert" the unbelieving. Instead, we are called to simply share the Gospel, which literally means the "Good News" – the plain, glorious truth of who Jesus is and what He did for us. Then it's *God's* part to take the truth we have shared and make it real to the other person. God's Spirit does the convicting, not God's servants. We speak the truth in love. God's Spirit confirms this truth in the heart of the other person, and then they are free to choose.

John 16:8 “And He (*the Holy Spirit*), when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment;” (NASB)

Mark 16:15 “He (*Jesus, after His resurrection*) said to them (*his disciples*), ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.’ ” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 4:2 “Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.” (NIV)

God convicts the lost in their heart-of-hearts of His existence and love, so there is no need for us to force a confession from them! We are entrusted with the delightful task of sharing truth, and when we do (with gentleness and respect), the Spirit of God uses that truth to accomplish His purpose in the lives of those who are lost.

2 Timothy 2:24-26 “The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses...” (NASB)

1 Peter 3:15,16 “but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame.” (NASB)

Some will respond to truth. Some will reject it. We cannot (and should not try to) make the decision for them. The most effective thing we can do in the service of our Lord is to share God's Word and set a good example, in other words: Speak the truth in love. In doing so we become the faithful ambassadors of the Son of God in a fallen world.

2 Corinthians 5:20 “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us...” (NIV)

Matthew 5:14-16 “You are the light of the world... Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” (NASB)

Philemon 1:6 “... be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Each of us is born with a conscience that is razor sharp, able to cut through the lies of this fallen world like a hot knife through butter. We can see this in the plain, common sense displayed in the words and actions of many children. But as we grow older, we either whet the edge of our conscience, keeping it sharp and clean, or we dull it down to a blunt, dirty instrument, incapable of anything useful, all depending on the choices we freely choose to make.

Hebrews 10:22 “let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience...” (NIV)

1 Timothy 4:1,2 “... in later times some will abandon the faith... Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 1:12 “Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity.” (NIV)

2 Timothy 2:21 “Those who cleanse themselves... will be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.” (NIV)

Some people make so many bad choices in life their conscience, the part of them that is sensitive to God’s existence and love, is about as sharp as a sponge. Consequently, they are easily taken in by all the lies and deceptions this world concocts and serves up to them. And as we consider these lost souls, it would seem they would be nearly impossible to reach.

Titus 1:15,16 “... both their minds and consciences are corrupted. They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him...” (NIV)

1 Timothy 1:18,19 “... fight the battle well, holding on to faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and so have suffered shipwreck...” (NIV)

But the writer of Hebrews reminds us that God’s Word is “alive and powerful,” sharper than any two-edged sword. It “pierces and divides” a person’s very soul and spirit, like a sword cleaving joints and marrow, and it righteously judges the “thoughts and intentions of the heart.” That’s pretty powerful stuff! The world can serve up each and every lie and deceit it has stored up in its recipe book, but when we share the simple truths contained in God’s Word, the dull, drunken conscience of the lost is

made sober and aware by the Spirit of God, who uses truth like a sword smith uses a hammer, forge, and whetting stone. God's Spirit can use God's Word to sharpen a dull conscience and convict and save the most wayward of the lost, if we will choose to speak the truth with love.

Hebrews 4:12 "For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." (NASB)

Isaiah 55:10,11 "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." (NIV)

2. How we know God cares.

Much of the evidence that God cares for us was presented in the discussion above regarding how we know God exists (since the two beliefs are related). In addition to this, perhaps the most powerful testimony that God cares for us is: He allowed His beloved, perfect Son to die for us. And not die just any death, but probably the most excruciatingly painful death ever devised by man. Think of the person you love most in the world. Would you let him or her suffer unutterable cruelty for the benefit of someone you don't care about? Of course not! And neither would God. There can be only one reason God allowed His beloved Son to go to the cross on our behalf – God cares for us with a love that is immeasurably powerful.

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." (NASB)

Psalms 103:11 "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love..." (NIV)

Jesus was slapped, beaten with fists, and beaten with a rod, by Roman soldiers expertly trained to inflict pain (see Matthew 26:67; 27:27-30; Mark 14:65; 15:15-21; Luke 22:63; John 18:22; 19:1-3). During these beatings, Isaiah 52:14 prophesies that "his appearance was... disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness."

The Roman soldiers also scourged Jesus. Roman scourging was not like the whipping we normally think of, with a long, slender braid. The Roman scourge was made of several individual leather thongs imbedded with heavy, sharp objects, which when thrown would sink into the flesh of the victim and sometimes stick there. The scourge would then be violently drawn back, ripping out chunks of flesh from the victim. The custom was then to rub salt into the wound. The Jews limited the

number of strokes to a maximum of 40 (in practice 39 in case of a miscount), but no such limitation was recognized by the Romans. Victims often did not survive.

After being scourged, the Roman soldiers twisted together a crown of long, cruel Judean thorns and crushed them onto Jesus' skull. Then they stood Him up in the Praetorium and mocked Him, beat Him, and spit in His face. Finally, they crucified Him on a cross, nailing His hands and feet to the beams and leaving His body to hang there, suspended between heaven and earth, until death.

Crucifixion is believed by some to be more painful than any other form of capital punishment, including all of the medieval forms of torture and death. As the victim hangs from outstretched arms, the weight of the body slowly dislocates the bones in the upper body. Cramping is extreme. Nerves are exposed by impaling spikes.

When the arms can no longer support the weight of the body, the chest cavity can no longer expand or contract. This effectively paralyzes the lungs, and the victim begins to suffocate, so he must try to free his torso by pushing up from the feet. This causes excruciating pain as torn flesh and broken bone are pressed against the nails passing through the feet, and a cycle of agony begins where the victim pushes up on the feet (until he can endure the pain no longer), then gasps for breath as he hangs from dislocated arms and shoulders.

There is also hunger and thirst, and exposure to heat during the day and cold during the night. It usually took days, not hours, to die upon a cross. The entire body is wrapped in excruciating pain for days until the victim finally dies. Sometimes, the bodies were left hanging there in various stages of decomposition as a warning to those considering rebellion against the Roman Empire.

Yet it is not only the physical pain endured by Jesus on the cross that testifies to God's love for us. An even more powerful witness is the spiritual pain Jesus endured on our behalf, which was in truth exponentially more agonizing than the pain borne by His body.

Jesus was on the cross for six hours, from 9:00am to 3:00pm. During the first three hours, from 9:00am until noon, many things happened. Jesus began His ordeal on the cross with a prayer for the very men who were wrongly putting Him to death, saying: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Soldiers cast lots for His clothing. Jesus was taunted by the soldiers, the Scribes and Pharisees, the people watching the crucifixion, and even the two criminals who were being crucified on either side of Him, although one of the two criminals repented and later asked Jesus to "remember me when you come into your kingdom," and Jesus replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:35-43). Jesus also spoke with His mother, Mary, and a disciple, John, and asked John to look after Mary after He was gone (John 19:25-27).

At noon, everything changed. A supernatural darkness came upon the earth that lasted for three hours, from noon until 3:00pm. It was during this time God took the eternal punishment for every sin ever committed by every person who has ever or will ever live, and poured them out upon Jesus. During those three hours of blindness upon the earth, Jesus bore the penalty that was justly ours and paid the full price for our every sin (Matthew 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44).

The Bible suggests Jesus never cried out in pain during the beatings, scourging, and crucifixion (Isaiah 53:7). But at the end of this ordeal, at approximately 3:00pm, Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). These words come from Psalm 22, a prophetic Psalm foreshadowing the suffering of the Messiah. The text indicates these words were screamed, as Jesus bore our sins on the cross during this last three hour period.

Jesus then said three final things. He said, “I am thirsty” (John 19:28), which is a natural expression of His humanity and a fulfillment of the prophecy in Psalm 69:21. He cried out a triumphant “It is finished!” (John 19:30), proclaiming His saving work on the cross was completed in full for all time. And finally, He ended His ordeal on the cross as He began it, in prayer. His first prayer was an expression of His love for mankind, asking God to forgive His persecutors for committing the greatest atrocity of all time – the crucifixion of the Messiah. His final prayer was a simple but extraordinarily powerful expression of love for God, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46).

It is important to understand that the physical pain Jesus endured as part of the crucifixion was in reality nothing compared to the spiritual pain Jesus endured as He paid the price for sin. God poured out all of the punishment that rightly belonged to all of sinful humanity (including the worst men and women we can think of, and including you and me) onto His innocent, beloved Son. Why? Because He loves us! Sinful, ungrateful, foolish us.

If God will do something like that for us when we emphatically do not deserve it, how can we for one tiny moment doubt He loves us? And if He will freely give us the greatest prize of all, our eternal salvation, then we can know with utmost certainty He will also freely give us all things. We can trust that God is and He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.

Romans 5:1-8 “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand... You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly

dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (NIV)

Ephesians 2:1-7 “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins... All of us also lived... gratifying the cravings of our flesh... But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions... in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.” (NIV)

Romans 8:31-39 “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things... Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NASB)

The painter's palette.

As an artist prepares to paint a blank canvas, one of the first things he or she does is squeeze different colors of paint onto a wooden palette. The artist then uses the palette as a stage to load his brush with color and begin to paint. One of the most important things the artist does before painting a single stroke is to choose the correct colors and mix them together on the palette to get the shades he needs in order to create the painting he envisions. If the colors are wrong, the artist will never get the painting right.

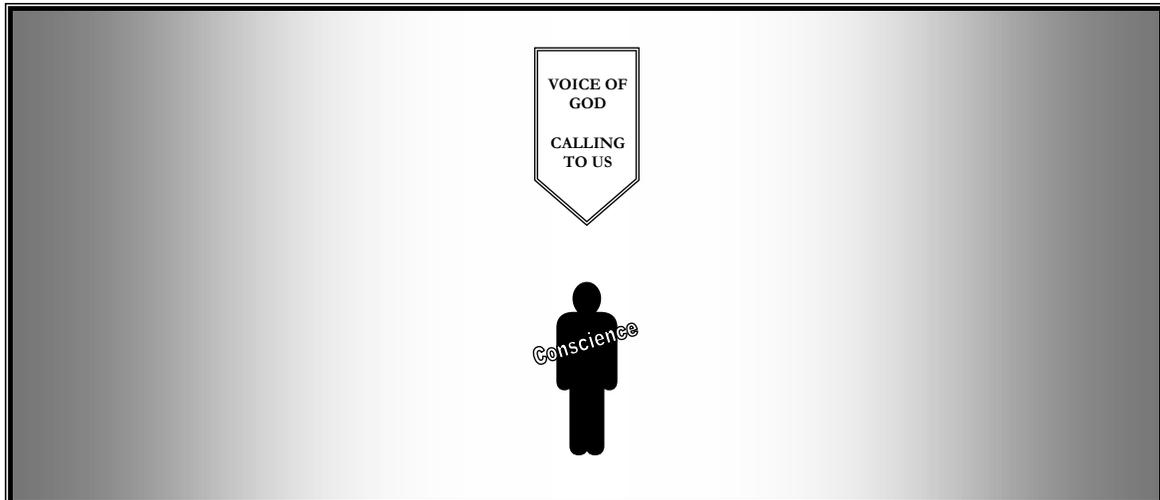
We are born into the world with an innate knowledge that God is and God cares. From this point, we are faced with a choice: Will we trust God and follow His leading, or will we reject God and forge our own path?

This is where the color palette of our lives is set. We can tell by the way we make this choice whether the canvas of our lives will ultimately be filled with the colors of Joy and Peace, or misery and despair. Our faith (or lack thereof) is what determines the shades available to us on the palette from which the portrait of our lives will be drawn, because...

FAITH FILLS US WITH HOPE AND LOVE, WHICH DRIVE OUT FEAR AND HATE.

*One universal experience: Every conscience encounters the voice of God
(where it all starts).*

In the following pages, we are going to draw upon all we have learned so far and build a visual template to help us better understand how a person finds Joy and Peace in life, or misery and despair. Below is the starting point for the template, and we will add to it as we move along. The purpose of this guide is certainly not to try to capture all the complexities of the human experience in a little diagram. That's impossible. It's simply a visual tool meant to provide us with a broad perspective on the major influences that lead to a life of happiness and fulfillment, or unhappiness and discontent.



Every Conscience Encounters God's Voice
The one universal experience
Where life truly begins

Everyone's life is different in nearly every respect. Although billions of men and women have inhabited our planet, the journey of life is unique for each and every one of us. But there is one thing we all share: At some point we encounter the voice of God calling out to us that God is and God cares. This is where our lives truly begin.

Psalm 97:6 "The heavens declare His righteousness, and all the peoples have seen His glory." (NASB)

Romans 1:20 "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse." (NIV)

Acts 17:26-28 "and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth... that they would seek God... and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist..." (NASB)

Psalm 19:1-6 "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their

utterances to the end of the world. In them He has placed a tent for the sun... and there is nothing hidden from its heat.” (NASB)

Revelation 3:20 “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.” (NASB)

John 10:2-28 “My (*Jesus*) sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.” (NIV)

Hebrews 4:7 “... just as has been said before, ‘TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS.’ ” (NASB)

The voice of God is not necessarily heard, but rather felt, deep in the heart-of-hearts, in that place within us where lies cannot be entertained. Deep down inside, in our inmost being, there is a place that only truth can reach. We can think of this place as our “conscience,” and as we have seen, our conscience begins sharp and keen, but can be dulled and diminished by bad decisions made over time.

Proverbs 20:27 “The lamp of the LORD searches the spirit of a man; it searches out his inmost being.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Romans 2:14,15 “... when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law... They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 4:2 “... we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.” (NIV)

Ezekiel 12:2 “... They have eyes to see but do not see and ears to hear but do not hear, for they are a rebellious people.” (NIV)

Titus 1:15,16 “... both their minds and consciences are corrupted. They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him...” (NIV)

1 Timothy 1:18,19 “... fight the battle well, holding on to faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and so have suffered shipwreck...” (NIV)

But at the end of the day, the conscience cannot be lied to. There is a part of us that is given by God where only truth can be received and where only truth can reside. It’s nestled there in the portion of our being that is our true self, not in the temporal body, but in the eternal soul.

The conscience is the repository of the foundational truths of life, for example: God exists. He is holy. He is love. We are sinful. We fall short of God’s glory. God loves us anyway, and He will provide if we will let Him. These core certainties amount to the promise of grace, what we called “Common Grace” in Chapter 5. They are the foundation upon which everything else we believe is based.

Upon these things we may build a house of truth or a house of lies. We can choose to construct a life based upon the remaining truths contained in God’s Word, or we can choose to construct a life based upon the lies of the fallen world. But these

foundational truths about God's existence and love are held inviolate within the walls of the human conscience. There are certain things we universally know deep down inside about who God is and how He behaves that nothing in the fallen world can rip out of us, because they are held safe and secure within the fortress of every soul's conscience.

Psalm 36:1 “Transgression speaks to the ungodly within his heart...” (NASB)

1 Timothy 4:1,2 “... in later times some will abandon the faith... Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.” (NIV)

2 Samuel 24:10 “David was conscience-stricken after he had... sinned greatly...” (NIV)

Hebrews 10:22 “let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience...” (NIV)

Acts 24:16 “So I (*Paul*) strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 1:12 “Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity.” (NIV)

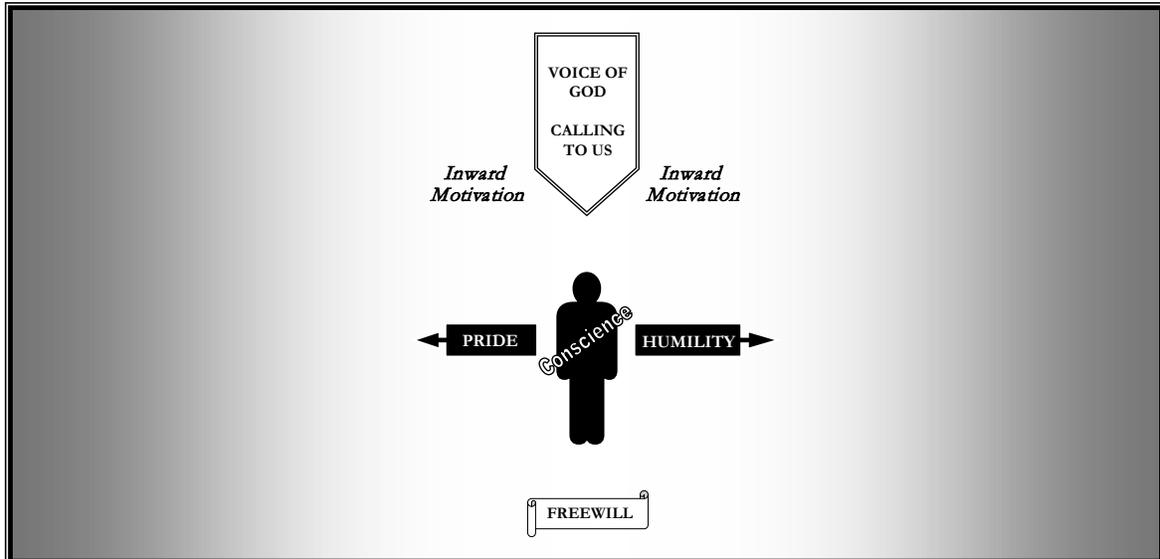
The purpose of the gift of conscience is to ensure God is fair with us. God holds us eternally responsible for the decisions we make, and He can justly do that because we each possess within us a conscience guarding foundational truths upon which every decision is made. Everything we think, say, and do is thought, said, and done in light of the unequivocal knowledge that there is a holy God in heaven who loves us, who cares, who knows, and who will provide if we will only let Him.*

Romans 1:18-23 “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man...” (NASB)

* What about children who die before they reach a level of maturity that would allow them to be sensitive to God's voice? And what about those with mental disabilities who regardless of age never develop sufficient intellectual faculties? The answer is: God knows exactly how these individuals would have responded to His voice had they grown to maturity or not suffered from their disabilities, and He will reward them in eternity accordingly. God is holy and God is love. He can act no other way.

This is the voice of God that calls out to us and is clearly heard in the conscience of every man and woman on the planet. It is from this one universal experience that every life's journey originates. And as we set forth on our journey, we discover there are only two paths to choose between.

*Two inward motivations: Humility or Pride
(our internal response).*



Pride	Humility
The two internal responses to God's voice	
The inward motivations that influence each of our choices	

As we saw in Chapter 5, everything we think, say, and do is inwardly motivated by either humility or pride. Each of us feels the voice of God proclaiming His existence and love, and from that moment on we know deep down inside there is something greater than us – a holy, sovereign Creator who is Lord of all. We also innately know that He loves us, and if we will be obedient to Him we will find Him, and in so doing, find the Joy and Peace for which we long.

Deuteronomy 30:19,20 “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the LORD your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days...” (NASB)

Jeremiah 29:13 “You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.” (NASB)

But the kicker is that word *obedient*. This truth residing in every person's conscience implies that in order to find and please the holy, loving God we sense, we must do

what He says, and “therein lies the rub.” Our nature is to rebel against anything greater than us, because our desire is to be the greatest of all.

Isaiah 53:6 “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way...” (NIV)

Ephesians 2:3-5 “... we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),” (NASB)

So as this Common Grace takes hold of us and we discover the one truth that is universal to all mankind (that a holy God loves us), we must choose whether to return His embrace or squirm from His grasp. The inward motivation for this choice will be one of two things – humility or pride. We will either humble ourselves before our Creator and choose to walk with Him, or in our pride turn aside to a path of our own choosing. This is the internal response of our freewill to the universal experience of encountering the voice of God.

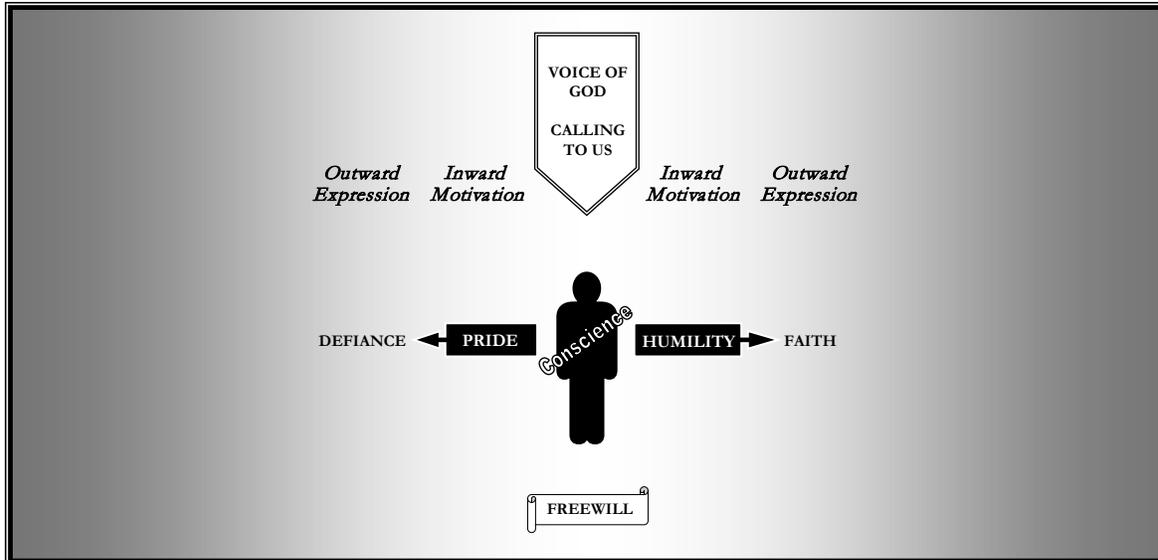
James 4:6 “... GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE.” (NASB)

Proverbs 21:2-24 “Every man’s way is right in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the hearts... Haughty eyes and a proud heart, the lamp of the wicked, is sin... ‘Proud,’ ‘Haughty,’ ‘Scoffer,’ are his names, who acts with insolent pride.” (NASB)

Proverbs 16:18-20 “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling. It is better to be of a humble spirit with the lowly than to divide the spoil with the proud. He who gives attention to the word will find good, and blessed is he who trusts in the LORD.” (NASB)

Micah 6:8 “... what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (NIV)

*Two outward expressions: Faith or Defiance
(our external response).*



Defiance	Faith
The two external responses to God's voice	
The outward expressions of our choices	
<i>Trusting in ourselves & defying God</i>	<i>Trusting in God & defying the world</i>
<i>Rebelling against God's will</i>	<i>Submitting to God's will</i>
<i>Seeking to be the highest authority</i>	<i>Seeking to follow the highest authority</i>

If humility and pride are the *inward motivations* for our choices once we encounter the voice of God, then faith and defiance are the *outward expressions* of these choices. We feel the voice of God calling to us that He is and He cares, and either humility or pride inwardly motivates choices that are outwardly expressed in lives characterized by either *faith in* or *defiance of* the gentle whisper of God's grace. Faith or defiance becomes our external response to the universal experience of encountering the voice of God.

If we hear the call of God and humbly choose to follow Him, our lives will be characterized by faith. We place our trust in the One who calls to us and choose to rely upon His Word and Spirit. Our faith is in Him, and we defy the things of the world.

Proverbs 3:5,6 “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” (NIV)

Psalm 73:24-26 “With Your counsel You will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” (NASB)

Titus 2:11-14 “For the grace of God... teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this

present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.” (NIV)

If we hear the call of God and pridefully choose to reject Him, our lives will be characterized by defiance. We refuse to place our trust in the One who calls to us, and choose instead to rely upon our own word and spirit. Our faith is in ourselves, and we defy the things of God.

Isaiah 3:8,9 “... their words and deeds are against the LORD, defying his glorious presence... they parade their sin like Sodom... Woe to them! They have brought disaster upon themselves.” (NIV)

Romans 2:8 “But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.” (NIV)

1 Timothy 1:18,19 “... fight the good fight, keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith.” (NASB)

Defiance is in a sense the opposite of faith. Faith is submitting to the will of God, because we trust Him more than ourselves. Defiance is rebellion against the will of God, not because we don't trust Him (our conscience recognizes He is trustworthy), but because we want to *be* Him. We want to be the highest authority in our lives, so we adamantly refuse to submit to any authority higher than ourselves, even our own Creator who formed the universe and everything in it.

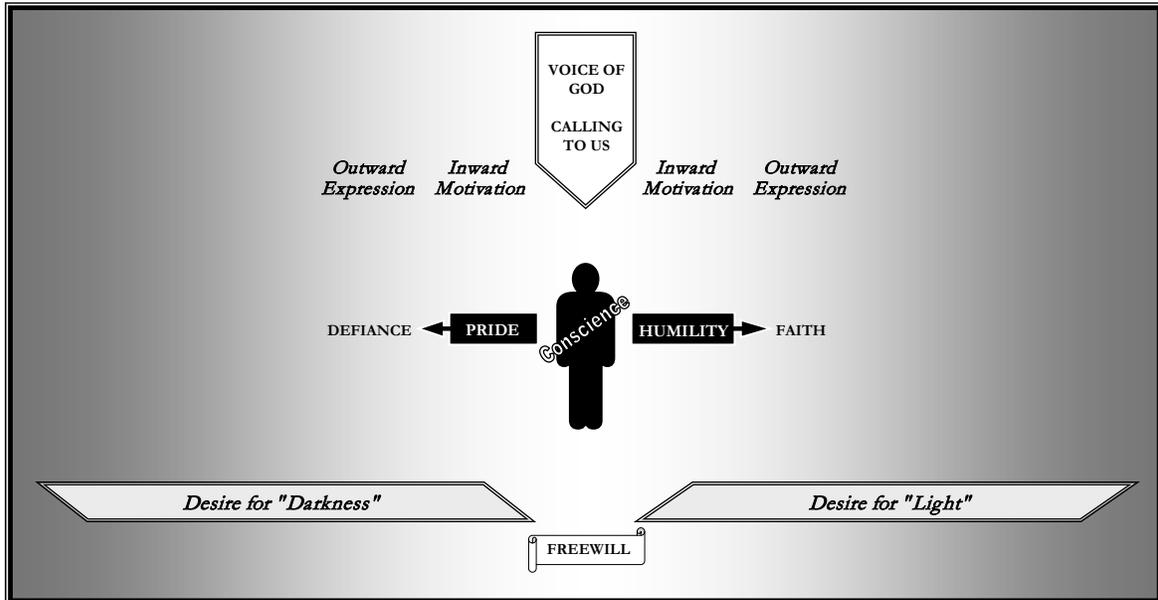
Job 22:21 “Submit to God and be at peace with him; in this way prosperity will come to you.” (NIV)

Romans 8:7-9 “the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Job 24:13-25 “There are those who rebel against the light, who do not know its ways or stay in its paths. When daylight is gone, the murderer rises up, kills the poor and needy, and in the night steals forth like a thief. The eye of the adulterer watches for dusk; he thinks, ‘No eye will see me,’ and he keeps his face concealed. In the dark, thieves break into houses, but by day they shut themselves in; they want nothing to do with the light. For all of them, midnight is their morning; they make friends with the terrors of darkness. Yet they are foam on the surface of the water... As heat and drought snatch away the melted snow, so the grave snatches away those who have sinned. The womb forgets them, the worm feasts on them; the wicked are no longer remembered but are broken like a tree. They prey on the barren and childless woman, and to the widow they show no kindness. But God drags away the mighty by his power; though they become established, they have no assurance of life. He may let them rest in a feeling of security, but his eyes

are on their ways. For a little while they are exalted, and then they are gone; they are brought low and gathered up like all others; they are cut off like heads of grain. If this is not so, who can prove me false and reduce my words to nothing?" (NIV)

*Two heart's desires: "Light" or "Darkness"
(the underlying current).*



Darkness	Light
The two desires of the heart...	
... that become the underlying current drawing us towards either God or the world	
<i>Represents the things of the world</i>	<i>Represents the things of God</i>
<i>We are born into & called from</i>	<i>We are created for & called to</i>
<i>Helps us (attempt to) hide from God</i>	<i>Helps us find God</i>
<i>Ultimately, we are devoured by it</i>	<i>Ultimately, we become it</i>
<i>One or the other becomes our treasure, and presents the clearest reflection of who we truly are</i>	

Why do we rebel? Why do we reject the grace of the living God, who will delight to guide and direct our paths throughout the journey of life, and choose instead to live in defiance of Him, relying as a (cheap) substitute on our own wisdom and power to forge a path through the evil that darkens the fallen world?

The answer has to do with the desires of our hearts. The Bible uses the image of the "heart" to describe the truest reflection of who we are as men and women blessed with the freedom to choose between good and evil. The heart represents the sum total of whom we choose to be.

**Proverbs 27:19 “As in water face reflects face, so the heart of man reflects man.”
(NASB)**

1 Peter 3:4 “... the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit... is precious in the sight of God.” (NASB)

1 Samuel 16:7 “... for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” (NASB)

The choices we make to do right or to do wrong are described in the Word of God as coming from the heart. It is our moral center, the residing place of our freewill, and from it flows everything we think, say, and do.

Proverbs 4:23 “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.” (NASB)

Matthew 15:10-19 “Jesus called the crowd to him and said, ‘Listen and understand. What goes into someone’s mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them... Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts – murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person...’ ” (NIV)

The multitude of choices flowing from our hearts over the course of our lives is ultimately determined by one overriding decision we make that controls our very destiny. It is perhaps the most fundamental choice of all, upon which every other decision we make is based, the choice of: What shall we desire? In other words: What is it we will place value upon as we travel through the journey of life? What will we choose to treasure?

Matthew 12:34,35 “... For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil.” (NASB)

Luke 12:34 “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (NASB)

We have only two alternatives – “light” or “darkness.” God’s Word makes it very easy for us, and uses metaphors of the most elemental nature to distinguish between the two divergent paths from which we may choose. They are easy to understand and mutually exclusive. Where one exists, the other cannot be. They are the only two treasures upon which we may set our heart’s desire.

God is light, and He lives in light. “Light” is therefore used as an image to represent all of the things of God.

1 John 1:5 “... God is light...” (NIV)

James 1:17 “Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.” (NASB)

Psalm 104:1-3 “... O LORD my God... You are clothed with splendor and majesty, covering Yourself with light as with a cloak, stretching out heaven like a tent curtain...” (NASB)

1 Timothy 6:13-16 “... God... alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen.” (NASB)

Because God is light, within Him there is no darkness, and without Him we are said to live in darkness. “Darkness” is therefore the image used to describe all of the things of the fallen world.

Ephesians 6:12 “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but... against the world forces of this darkness...” (NASB)

1 John 1:5 “... in him (*God*) there is no darkness at all...” (NIV)

Daniel 2:20-22 “Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever... He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him.” (NIV)

Micah 7:7,8 “But as for me, I will watch expectantly for the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me. Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy. Though I fall I will rise; though I dwell in darkness, the LORD is a light for me.” (NASB)

And so light represents all that is good, righteous, and true, while darkness represents all that is evil, sinful, and false.

Ephesians 5:8-16 “... you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible... Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil...” (NIV 1984 ed.)

Romans 13:12-14 “... let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

We find ourselves born into a fallen world shrouded in darkness. Then one day within our hearts we begin to sense the voice of God calling us out of the darkness and into His light. We may have been born in darkness, but we discover God created

us to experience (and indeed become) light. The voice urges us to leave the darkness behind and come into the light, and in response we either desire to begin the journey into the light of God or to remain in the darkness of the world. We choose to set our heart's desire upon one of these two things, and there isn't any middle ground. At any given moment, our choices reflect our desire for either light or darkness. Twilight is not an option.

1 Peter 2:9 “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” (NIV)

John 12:46 “I (*Jesus*) have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness.” (NIV)

John 8:12 “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.’ ” (NIV)

Matthew 6:19-24 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” (NASB)

Why would we desire darkness instead of light? What conceivable reason could there be for someone to reject the glorious light of God and instead choose to remain without Him in the darkness of the fallen world? The answer is: In the darkness we can do what we want! Darkness provides an illusion that no one is there to see. And if no one can see, then there is no one to whom we are accountable. We foolishly think we can hide acts we know are wrong underneath the heavy cloak of darkness, and when the things of darkness are our desire, we will gladly choose darkness over light.

John 3:17-21 “For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him... This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.” (NASB)

Isaiah 29:15 “Woe to those who go to great depths to hide their plans from the LORD, who do their work in darkness and think, ‘Who sees us? Who will know?’ ” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 4:5 “... the Lord... will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts; and then each man’s praise will come to him from God.” (NASB)

This desire for darkness – a fragile shelter under which we attempt to carry out intentional wrongs – utterly destroys lives. It drags men and women with hard, rebellious hearts into lives of steadily increasing sin, and ultimately unrelenting misery and despair. It pulls us down, further and further, as we seek to satiate ourselves with the temporary distractions of the world, until we are finally faced with the awful truth that we have wasted the precious gift of life in a vain pursuit of empty things. Our heart’s desire was for darkness, and in the end, we are devoured by it.

Proverbs 11:6 “... the unfaithful are trapped by evil desires.” (NIV)

Ephesians 4:18,19 “They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Romans 1:21-32 “... although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools... Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts... They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator... Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts... Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.” (NIV)

Habakkuk 2:4-17 “See, the enemy is puffed up; his desires are not upright... he is arrogant and never at rest. Because he is as greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied... You will be filled with shame instead of glory... The violence you have done... will overwhelm you, and your destruction... will terrify you.” (NIV)

But if we reject the darkness and instead set our desires for the things of the light, then we welcome the light. We rejoice in the illumination, and we delight in the relationship with God that can be because light is. As we bask in the warmth of the light, we see God and He sees us, with clear, undimmed eyes, and a relationship built upon trust and love begins to grow, until finally we are filled with the light of God and become the instruments through which a darkened world is illuminated.

Psalm 36:9 “... In Your light we see light.” (NASB)

1 Thessalonians 5:5-10 “You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others... since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that... we may live together with him.” (NIV)

Philippians 2:14-16 “Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life...” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 4:6-10 “For God... has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves... that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.” (NASB)

Isaiah 42:5,6 “This is what God the LORD says – the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: ‘I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you... a light...’ ” (NIV)

In a very real sense, a battle rages within us between light and darkness. Both wish to be the substance that surrounds and influences our every decision, and the treasure upon which we set our heart’s desire. Which treasure we seek impacts at the most foundational level the journey we eventually experience. If we delight in the light of the living God, then God can grant the inmost longings of our heart’s desire. If we delight in the darkness of the fallen world, then God allows us to walk down our own ruinous path to its bitter end.

James 4:1 “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?” (NIV)

Psalm 37:4 “Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart.” (NASB)

2 Chronicles 1:7-12 “That night God appeared to Solomon and said to him, ‘Ask for whatever you want me to give you.’ Solomon answered God, ‘... Give me wisdom and knowledge, that I may lead this people, for who is able to govern this great people of yours?’ God said to Solomon, ‘Since this is your heart’s desire and you have not asked for wealth, riches or honor, nor for the death of your enemies, and since you have not asked for a long life but for wisdom and knowledge to govern my people over whom I have made you king, therefore wisdom and knowledge will be given you. And I will also give you wealth, riches and honor, such as no king who was before you ever had and none after you will have.’ ” (NIV)

Isaiah 50:10,11 “... Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on their God. But now, all you who light fires and

provide yourselves with flaming torches, go, walk in the light of your fires and of the torches you have set ablaze. This is what you shall receive from my hand: You will lie down in torment.” (NIV)

What we desire manifests itself in our motivations (humility or pride), and everything that springs from our motivations (faith or defiance, and as we shall see, hope or fear, and love or hate). It is the undercurrent that draws everything we think, say, and do towards either God or the temporary distractions of the world.

Our desire for either light or darkness then becomes the underlying theme that plays throughout the symphony of our lives. It determines the melodies, harmonies, and rhythms we experience as we journey through life. And it determines whether the music of our lives is filled with sounds of Joy and Peace or misery and despair.

These desires present the truest reflection of our freewill, painting an unflinching portrait of the man or woman we actually are. *If you don't understand yourself and wish to discover why you do what you do, ask: What are truly the desires of my heart?* When you truthfully answer this simple question, you will be able to see yourself in an unclouded mirror and better understand the choices you make. And if you don't like what you discover, the solution is equally simple: Turn from the darkness and set your heart's desire upon the light. This will set into motion a chain of events whereby God's Spirit and God's Word can transform you into the man or woman you desire to be.

Proverbs 27:19 “As in water face reflects face, so the heart of man reflects man.” (NASB)

Colossians 3:1,2 “... set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God... not on earthly things.” (NIV)

2 Timothy 2:22 “Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.” (NIV)

Acts 26:18 “... turn... from darkness to light, and... receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me (*Jesus*).” (NIV)

Romans 12:2 “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” (NASB)

Romans 7:15 to 8:38 “I (*Paul*) do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!... because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death... Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires... the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit... those who are led by the Spirit of God are

sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship... The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ... what, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Proverbs 20:5 “The purposes of a person’s heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out.” (NIV)

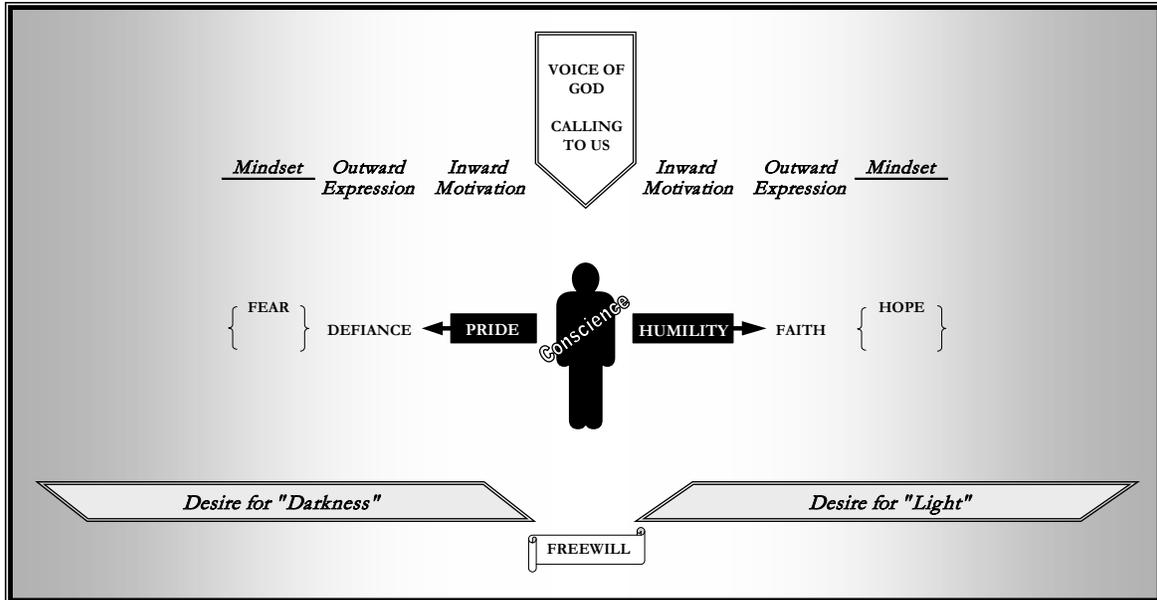
So far we have discovered that everyone’s conscience experiences the voice of God calling out that God is and God cares. We choose to set our heart’s desire upon either the light of God or the darkness of the world, and this most fundamental of all choices becomes the undercurrent that draws us towards our life’s end – the fulfillment of God’s purpose or the abandonment of it.

If we desire the light, then the choices flowing with this desire will be inwardly motivated by humility and outwardly expressed through lives characterized by faith. If we desire the darkness, then the choices flowing with this desire will be inwardly motivated by pride and outwardly expressed through lives characterized by defiance.

How do lives characterized by faith or defiance affect us? What can we expect if we desire the light and humbly choose to have faith in God? What can we expect if we desire the darkness and pridefully choose to defy God?

These foundational decisions shape and mold our every thought, word, and deed. They create the environment within which our minds rest (or crumble), and the footing upon which our actions are grounded (or destabilized). We’ll look first at how faith or defiance affect our thoughts, and then at how they affect our words and deeds.

*Two mindsets: Hope or Fear
(the effect on our thoughts).*



Fear	Hope
The effect of Defiance or Faith upon our minds	
The "mindsets" that determine how we interpret and respond to the challenges of life	
<i>Hearts & minds in discord</i>	<i>Hearts & minds in harmony</i>
<i>Unhealthy & Debilitating</i>	<i>Healthy & Empowering</i>
<i>Plagues with Insecurity & Cowardice</i>	<i>Imparts Confidence & Courage</i>
<i>Curse of a guilty conscience</i>	<i>Gift of a clean conscience</i>
<i>Causes us to freeze up and/or lash out</i>	<i>Provides complete assurance - not wishful thinking</i>
<i>Known in both prosperity & adversity</i>	<i>Known in both prosperity & adversity</i>
<i>Only antidote is: Faith</i>	<i>Something the world cannot provide</i>

How we choose to live our lives has a tremendous impact on our overall state of mind and our mental health. The decisions we make can fill our minds with an empowering enthusiasm for life that goes before us like a lamp, or a crippling anxiety that hovers above us like a storm cloud. Our minds are steadily filled with either the light or the darkness upon which we set our hearts' desire.

Ephesians 4:18,19 "They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Deuteronomy 28:62-67 "... because you did not obey the LORD your God... the LORD will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life. In the morning you will say, 'If only it were

evening!' and in the evening, 'If only it were morning!' – because of the terror that will fill your hearts..." (NIV)

Philippians 4:6-9 "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things... practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you." (NASB)

Isaiah 60:1-9 "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you... Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy... to the honor of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor." (NIV)

God grants each of us a conscience that holds fundamental truths about who He is and how He behaves inviolate within our hearts. We know deep within that a holy God loves us, and in response to this truth we choose either to step forward into the light and place our faith in Him, or to cower in the darkness and defiantly rely upon ourselves.

As we choose to set our desire upon the things of the light, faith tunes our minds to the frequency of our hearts, so they are in harmony. When we choose to walk humbly with the living God who calls to us, our hearts and minds are joined in one accord. They are in sync with one another, working together to build a loving relationship with the Creator of the universe and everything in it.

As this relationship is developed over time and we discover all that God has done and will do for us, we gain a confidence and courage that overcomes the evil and injustice that plagues us in a fallen world. This sense of confidence and courage permeates our thoughts, like a sweet smell from the kitchen that fills a hungry home, and powerfully affects how we respond to the changing circumstances of life. We will call this sense of confidence and courage: *Hope*.

Defiance detunes the mind from the heart, so there is disharmony between the two. When we choose to pridefully walk away from the living God who calls to us, our hearts and minds are in discord. They are out of sync with one another, with our conscience urging us towards the light, but our choices facing us towards the darkness. We are pulled in two opposite directions. Yet in the end our choices always prevail, and we plunge into the gloom of darkness.

There, instead of building a loving relationship with the holy God, we join ourselves to the base things of the fallen world. Rather than developing a confidence and courage to overcome the world, we develop an insecurity and cowardice that are the world's hallmarks. And this insecurity and cowardice become the substance that

permeates our thoughts and determines how we respond to our changing circumstances. We will call this sense of insecurity and cowardice: *Fear*.

And so either hope or fear becomes the mindset that determines how we respond to the changing circumstances of life. A “mindset” is defined as: A fixed mental attitude or disposition that predetermines a person’s responses to and interpretations of situations.* How we set our minds will determine at the most fundamental level how we interpret and respond to the challenges of life.

A mind filled with the hope that comes from faith in the holy, loving God meets the challenges of life with a confidence in God that inspires courage towards our changing circumstances. The humble person of faith who chooses to live in the light experiences a harmony between the conscience of the heart and the choices of the will, and the result is a healthy mind full of hope.

A mind filled with the fear that comes from defiance of the holy, loving God meets the challenges of life with an insecurity about themselves that inspires cowardice towards our changing circumstances. The prideful, defiant person who chooses to live in the darkness experiences discord between the conscience and the will, and the result is an unhealthy mind full of Fear.

The hope born of faith is the ground spring of mental health. It’s what keeps the mind stable and functioning during times of trouble or grief. Faithful men and women are able to experience the Joy and Peace we all long for, even during the most heartbreaking of circumstances, because in spite of suffering they are filled with hope.

The fear that inevitably comes from defiance of God can be the beginning of a variety of mental disorders, sometimes called “Neuroses.”† Without hope, there is nothing to stabilize the mind and keep it functional when we encounter trouble or grief. We are on our own, with only the fear that is the unavoidable result of defiance of the living God to keep us company, and our minds break down into various stages of depression and uncontrollable (and sometimes irrational) emotions that easily overwhelm us.

This relates to the idea of a “clean” or “guilty” conscience. When we choose to do right, humbly following the lead of our hearts into the light of God, faith fills our minds with hope, the gift of a clean conscience. Our hearts beat in harmony with our

* The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition.

† Neuroses generally describe those mental illnesses that fall short of “Psychoses.” In very loose terms (that admittedly might dissatisfy a Psychiatrist), a Psychosis is a mental illness that is due to either a physical cause (such as a chemical imbalance) or extreme trauma (such as physical, psychological, or sexual abuse). A Neurosis is a mental illness that does not arise from any of the neurological or environmental causes associated with Psychoses. Neuroses are marked by depression, anxiety, and irrational fears, while Psychoses are marked by delusions and hallucinations. Defiance of God can easily result in Neuroses. Psychoses are usually the result of something other than bad decisions.

minds, and we develop confidence and courage. When we nurture our God-given conscience with good decisions, the inevitable result is a mind full of hope.

1 Timothy 1:5 “But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” (NASB)

Acts 24:16 “So I (*Paul*) strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.” (NIV)

Psalms 62:1-5 “My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken... Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

When we choose to do wrong, pridefully rebelling against the leading of our hearts and turning instead to walk into the darkness, defiance fills our minds with fear, the curse of a guilty conscience. An irregular beat develops between our hearts and minds, and the disharmony between the two pounding within us fills our anxious thoughts with the torments of insecurity and the machinations of cowardice. When we injure our God-given conscience with intentional wrongs, the inevitable result is a mind full of fear.

1 Samuel 25:28-31 “... Let no wrongdoing be found in... my master... and... my master will not have on his conscience the staggering burden of needless bloodshed or of having avenged himself...” (NASB – 1984 ed.)

Isaiah 1:4 “Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

1 Timothy 4:2 “... hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.” (NASB)

Hebrews 10:22 “let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience...” (NIV)

Now let's look closer at exactly what hope and fear are, beginning with hope.

Today when we use the word “hope,” we're often talking about something we wish for but doubt will happen. For example, someone asks if we think our favorite team will make it to the playoffs, and we sigh, look wistfully up at the clouds and say, “I hope so,” knowing full well their chances are slim to none. This kind of hope is a flimsy hedge we plant to temporarily ward off inevitable disappointment, and it is emphatically not hope as it is described in the Bible.

Psalms 25:1-3 “In you, LORD my God, I put my trust... No one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame...” (NASB)

Isaiah 49:23 “... those who hope in me (*God*) will not be disappointed.” (NIV)

The concept of hope in the Word of God is completely different from the hope we normally think of, because our hope is not based upon the ever changing fortunes of an uncertain world. Instead, it's based on the enduring faithfulness of the God of all creation. With almighty God as its foundation, hope is transformed from a dubious longing to an unwavering confidence that something will with absolute certainty take place. It's not wishful thinking. It's complete assurance that what is hoped for will one day come to pass. There is no element of uncertainty in the biblical idea of hope. It's just the opposite – a liberating freedom from doubt.

Psalm 146:5,6 “Blessed are those... whose hope is in the LORD their God. He is the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them — he remains faithful forever.” (NIV)

Psalm 71:1-14 “In you, LORD, I have taken refuge... my rock... to which I can always go... you are... my fortress... you have been my hope, Sovereign LORD, my confidence since my youth... as for me, I will always have hope...” (NIV)

Hebrews 10:22-36 “let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings... Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful... Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.” (NIV)

Because our hope is grounded on the faithfulness of God to His Word, hope becomes an extremely powerful force that guides and guards our thinking. We trust and believe God will fulfill His promises, and this steadies our minds and imparts a confidence in God that translates into courage towards our circumstances. Our hope becomes the anchor that keeps our minds firm and secure when the storms of life overtake us.

Lamentations 3:21-25 “This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. The LORD’S lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. ‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I have hope in Him.’ The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him.” (NASB)

Psalm 119:114 “You (*God*) are my refuge and my shield; I have put my hope in your word.” (NIV)

Hebrews 6:19 “We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure...” (NIV)

Psalm 112:4-8 “Even in darkness light dawns for the upright, for those who are gracious and compassionate and righteous... Surely the righteous will never

be shaken... They will have no fear of bad news; their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the LORD. Their hearts are secure, they will have no fear..." (NIV)

A steady mind anchored in hope is confident and courageous, which in turn imparts other wonderful qualities. We are bold when presented with an opportunity to take a stand and speak the truth in love. As we walk humbly side-by-side with our Creator, our strength is continually renewed, so we grow neither weary nor faint. When testing is prolonged, we are able to endure. And when the fallen world comes crashing down around us, rather than succumbing to anxiety and depression, we are able to lift our hearts in praise of the living God whose faithfulness gives us hope.

2 Corinthians 3:12 "Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold." (NIV)

Isaiah 40:31 "but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." (NIV)

1 Thessalonians 1:3 "We remember... your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." (NIV)

Psalms 42:1-6 "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God... Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God." (NIV)

Proverbs 3:13-26 "Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed... My son, do not let wisdom and understanding out of your sight, preserve sound judgment and discretion; they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck. Then you will go on your way in safety, and your foot will not stumble. When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, for the LORD will be at your side and will keep your foot from being snared." (NIV)

Psalms 89:15-17 "Blessed are those who have learned to... walk in the light of your presence, LORD. They rejoice in your name all day long; they celebrate your righteousness. For you are their glory and strength..." (NIV)

Confidence, courage, boldness, endurance, a strength that does not fail, a reason to lift our hearts in praise rather than sink into depression – all of these things fill our minds with an enthusiasm for the adventure of life and an optimism for the approaching future that funnel down into our hearts and make us exultant and joyful. And the amazing thing is: We experience these things not only during life's triumphant moments, but also during times of great distress. Hope kindles the light in our eyes and fuels the spring in our step as we boldly set out to take on the world. And when the world raises its banner and accepts the challenge, it is hope that

supports the depth of our eyes and sustains the firmness of our step, which carries us through the battle from the darkness to the light.

Psalm 33:1-22 “Sing joyfully to the LORD... For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does... the eyes of the LORD are on... those whose hope is in his unfailing love... We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. May your unfailing love be with us, LORD, even as we put our hope in you.” (NIV)

Romans 5:1,2 “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God.” (NASB)

Romans 12:10-21 “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor... rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (NASB)

Habakkuk 3:17-19 “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength...” (NIV)

Romans 12:12 “Be joyful in hope...” (NIV)

Hope is one of the greatest gifts of God, and so it is a major, recurring theme of the Bible. God calls us out of the darkness because He wants us to experience the gift of hope. God saved us to enjoy all the things hope imparts. God gave us His eternal, flawless Word so when we trust in it, our minds can be strengthened, protected, and encouraged by its message of hope. A healthy mind full of hope is an integral part of God’s plan for our lives, and as we discover this hope, we catch a glimpse of the surpassing greatness of God’s power and the unimaginable blessing He has in store for those who will put their trust in Him.

Romans 8:24 “For in this hope we were saved...” (NIV)

Jeremiah 29:11 “ ‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’ ” (NIV)

Romans 15:4 “For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” (NASB)

Ephesians 1:18,19 “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe...” (NASB)

Hope is portrayed in God’s Word as being “living,” something so tangible and real we should almost consider it to be alive. When we choose to receive the gift of

salvation and accept Jesus as our Savior, we are “born again,” and the station to which the newborn child of God is delivered is described as a “living hope.” We were dead in our sin, lost in the darkness. Then by God’s mercy and through the work of His Son, we are reborn and delivered from the darkness into the place where hope is alive. And, as we shall see, it is within this “living hope” that we are able to know Joy and Peace.

1 Peter 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope...” (NASB)

Hope is our defense as we journey through life. It grants us a steadfast, courageous mind in the midst of battle. It is our refuge and shield. But hope is also much more. In many ways, it is our offensive weapon in the battle to bring light to the darkness, because hope is the quality of mind that attracts a weary world to the light we share as God’s people. The hope within us shines like a lamp in the darkness, and the lost can’t help but wonder where we found such a thing in a place like this. Hope opens doors to objective conversations about the love of Christ with curious minds.

Psalm 33:20 “We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield.” (NIV)
1 Peter 3:15,16 “But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have...” (NIV)

Men and women whose lives are filled with hope stand out from the rest of the world and become objects of curiosity to the lost, because if there is one thing this fallen world cannot give, it’s hope. It can grant a wide array of temporary distractions to numb the sense of loneliness and despondency we feel without Jesus, and it can grant a counterfeit hope that is in truth nothing more than wishful thinking. But it can never grant the unwavering confidence and empowering courage of true hope that comes only from faith in the living God.

Job 8:13,14 “... the hope of the godless will perish, whose confidence is fragile, and whose trust a spider’s web.” (NASB)

When the lost encounter hope in the lives of a follower of Jesus, it gives them cause to lift their weary heads up from the empty distractions of the world that direct their eyes downward to the low, base things of darkness, and consider if there might possibly be something more, a light from above that could lift them out of the darkness and fill them with a hope that is steadfast and true, immune to the crippling power that binds them to the gutters. They look up into the eyes of a faithful man or woman and see behind them light, and the source of light – a holy, loving God who offers even them a living hope.

2 Corinthians 4:2-10 “... we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ... For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 3:3,18 “... you are a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts... And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord...” (NIV)

Isaiah 42:5,6 “This is what God the LORD says – the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: ‘I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you... a light...’ ” (NIV)

If we choose to live in defiance of God and to seek our own way in the fallen world, eventually whatever spark was in our eyes slowly fades and is finally snuffed out. We end our days in emptiness and grief, because without faith, we are without hope.

1 Thessalonians 4:13 “Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to... grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.” (NIV)

In the absence of faith and hope, and in the grip of prideful defiance, there is only one thing to fill our minds: Fear. We’ve rejected the foundational truths that lie inviolate within our hearts. We’ve gone against the clear leadings of our conscience. We’ve denied the light and given ourselves to the darkness. We’ve defied the voice of the living God. How could these things fill our minds with anything but a mounting dread?

Hebrews 10:26-31 “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment... For we know him who said, ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ and again, ‘The Lord will judge his people.’ It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (NIV)

The reason our minds are full of fear is: We know judgment is coming. Just as our conscience assures us God is and God cares, it also reminds us He is holy and He cannot be mocked. We can run from the light and try to hide, but as we curl up in our particular corner of the darkness, deep down inside we know our little rebellion is doomed. Eventually, God will bring justice to a fallen world, and on that inevitable day everything we have thought, said, and done will be brought into the light and judged.

Galatians 6:7 “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap.” (NASB)

Isaiah 2:12-22 “For the LORD of hosts will have a day of reckoning against everyone who is proud and lofty, and against everyone who is lifted up, that he may be abased... The pride of man will be humbled, and the loftiness of men will be abased, and the LORD alone will be exalted in that day... Men will go into caves of the rocks, and into holes of the ground before the terror of the LORD, and before the splendor of His majesty, when He arises to make the earth tremble... Stop regarding man, whose breath of life is in his nostrils; for why should he be esteemed?” (NASB)

Obadiah 1:3,4 “The arrogance of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rock, in the loftiness of your dwelling place, who say in your heart, “Who will bring me down to earth?” Though you build high like the eagle, though you set your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down,’ declares the Lord.” (NASB)

Hebrews 4:13 “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 4:5 “... the Lord... will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts; and then each man’s praise will come to him from God.” (NASB)

If we know all this, why would we do that? Why would we choose the darkness knowing full well that a day of reckoning is coming? The answer is that in the self-induced madness of our pride, and in the brittle hardness of our hearts, despite the knowledge of a coming judgment we still lust for the base, degrading things of a fallen world, and so we choose to feed our lust rather than deny it. We still desire the taste of sin, so we choose to treasure the things of darkness and sink our teeth into whatever our perverted hearts mistake for a delicacy. We defy God, look for as many reasons as we can to justify our bad decisions, and determine to take our chances in the coming judgment. And for a very short time the taste of our indulgence is sweet; but our wrongdoing comes with a price: An ever-increasing, debilitating fear.

Romans 1:18-32 “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s

invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools... Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised. Amen. Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts... Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them." (NIV)

John 3:19-21 "... men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God." (NASB)

Ephesians 4:17-23 "So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more... put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

1 John 2:15-17 "Do not love the world or anything in the world... For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

What exactly do we mean by fear? Fear is a state of mind that can possess us in many forms. It can be an onslaught of sheer terror, or it can be a little nagging anxiety in the back of our minds we don't necessarily understand but can't seem to get rid of, and it slowly grows with a deliberateness that is in its own way terrifying.

Job 15:20-26 "... the wicked man suffers torment... Distress and anguish fill him with terror; troubles overwhelm him... because he shakes his fist at God and vaunts himself against the Almighty, defiantly charging against him..." (NIV)

Deuteronomy 28:62-67 “... because you did not obey the LORD your God... the LORD will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life. In the morning you will say, ‘If only it were evening!’ and in the evening, ‘If only it were morning!’ – because of the terror that will fill your hearts...” (NIV)

Ezekiel 12:19 “... They will eat their food in anxiety and drink their water in despair... because of the violence of all who live there.” (NIV)

Regardless of the speed or intensity with which fear overtakes us, it *always* creates two elementary things – insecurity and cowardice. Just as fear is the opposite of hope, the insecurity and cowardice created by fear are the opposites of the confidence and courage created by hope.

Deep in our hearts, what might even be considered to be our sub-conscience, our decisions to defy God create a fear that manifests itself in a fundamental insecurity about our place in the world. We rightly feel lost and alone, because our rebellion against God has in fact left us lost and alone. This comes as quite a shock, because when we first enter the darkness there seems to be plenty of company.

But what we eventually discover, to our horror, is: In the darkness everyone is alone. Darkness suffers no rival, and it ultimately allows no competing influence to exist within its realm. Whatever friends, lovers, or heroes darkness might have used to lure us into its depths become phantoms that dissolve into the shadows, as the temporary distractions they represent lose their thrill and leave us increasingly frustrated and distressed. Darkness envelopes a defiant heart, then waits patiently as the seductive powers of worldly things lose their charms one by one, until nothing is left but a bitter, isolated man or woman, ready to be consumed by the jaws of insecurity. Darkness then pulls up a chair next to us, and if the impenetrable gloom could be lifted, we would see a cold, deadly smile.

Isaiah 21:4 “My heart falters, fear makes me tremble; the twilight I longed for has become a horror to me.” (NIV)

This is the cost of choosing to remain in the darkness to commit intentional wrongs. The cloak of darkness we were depending upon to allow us to pursue our lusts creates the very state of loneliness tormenting our souls. Alone we are left with nothing but our own abilities and the certain knowledge of coming judgment. The result is an unrelenting insecurity about ourselves that grows steadily day by day, as the darkness that was in a sense our perverted version of hope gradually begins to strangle us.

Job 27:8 “For what is the hope of the godless when he is cut off, when God requires his life?” (NASB)

Denial is a powerful tool of the human psyche. Our minds have the capacity to temporarily deny the existence of many things, and often when we make the foundational choice to reject the light and embrace the darkness, we are able to shove the resulting fear and insecurity all the way back into the dustiest corners of our minds, then seal them off with walls three feet thick, painted over with a cheery color, and supported by a piece of heavy furniture or two.

But fear and insecurity are not so easily dismissed. They are in some ways mighty gifts from God whose purpose is to inform us on no uncertain terms that we have made a terrible, fundamental, life-altering mistake, by choosing the darkness over the light. And so – even if fear and insecurity are buried somewhere in the inky depths of our sub-conscience – one day God gives them a nod, and they just stick out their little fingers and start pushing against that wall; and whether we like it or not, eventually the wall starts closing in on us, and the nice, spacious room we’ve created for ourselves in our carefree minds begins to suddenly look smaller and smaller. Then the wall comes crashing down like thunder, and fear and insecurity burst through, take us by the throat, and begin to squeeze.

Isaiah 26:20,21 “... enter your rooms and shut the doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while... the LORD is coming out of his dwelling to punish the people of the earth for their sins...” (NIV)

Psalms 55:4,5 “My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen on me. Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me.” (NIV)

What comes next, if we do not repent and seek the light, is cowardice. Scared, insecure people are gutless cowards. Fear and insecurity begin to strangle their defiant minds, and alone in the darkness all that can be envisioned are acts of supreme cowardice. These dishonorable acts are byproducts of the desperation that comes from fear and insecurity, where people will do literally anything in a frantic attempt to gain some sort of relief from the withering heat of fear. Cowardice becomes the balm with which defiant minds attempt to sooth the wounds of insecurity.

Genesis 3:9,10 “But the LORD God called to the man (*Adam*), ‘Where are you?’ He answered, ‘I... was afraid... so I hid.’” (NIV)

1 Samuel 15:24 “Then Saul said to Samuel, ‘I have sinned. I violated the LORD’s command and your instructions. I was afraid of the men and so I gave in to them.’” (NIV)

Psalms 31:13-18 “For I (*David*) hear many whispering, ‘Terror on every side!’ They conspire against me and plot to take my life... Let their lying lips be silenced, for with pride and contempt they speak arrogantly against the righteous.” (NIV)

Deuteronomy 1:26-30 “... you (*the Exodus generation of Israelites*) rebelled against the command of the LORD your God. You grumbled in your tents and said, ‘... Our brothers have made our hearts melt in fear...’ Then I (*God*) said to you,

‘Do not be terrified; do not be afraid... The LORD your God, who is going before you, will fight for you...’ ” (NIV)

For most people the ascendancy of fear, insecurity, and cowardice to the throne room of their minds is a slow, deliberate process. We don’t immediately succumb to the dehumanizing effects of fear, but instead gradually slide into their grip as each bad decision takes us step by step further and further down into the darkness. Most don’t come out of the gate slipping razor-sharp knives into the backs of the unsuspecting. It takes a few years for the calluses to build up on our hearts before we are capable of such things, but if we don’t allow God’s grace to save us from ourselves, we end up masters of the most deceitful arts imaginable.

Some men and women are so given to evil the transformation from child to monster is shockingly rapid. This fallen world does its best to speed the process with liberal amounts of injustice, abuse, and violence. Regardless of the pace, the end result of a defiant will set on the darkness is a mind weighed down by ballooning insecurities and the inevitable guilt that comes from cowardly acts motivated by fear. And these burdens draw us deeper and deeper into the darkness, like a swimmer dragged down to the depths by lead weights shackled to hands and feet.

Proverbs 12:25 “Anxiety in a man’s heart weighs it down...” (NASB)

Psalm 14:4 “Will evildoers never learn... There they are, overwhelmed with dread...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Fear is debilitating, but it’s interesting to note it can tear us down in two very different ways. It either causes us to freeze up, like the proverbial “deer caught in the headlights,” or it causes us to lash out, like a startled animal that attacks a noisy passerby. We either don’t do anything, or we do the inappropriate thing, because our judgment has been clouded by fear. Both are acts of cowardice, as when a soldier either refuses to fight or commits atrocities upon civilians.

Job 18:5,11 “The lamp of the wicked man is snuffed out... Terrors startle him on every side and dog his every step.” (NIV)

Matthew 25:14-30 “... a man going on a journey... called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.’ His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share

your master's happiness!' The man with two bags of gold also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.' His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.' His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' " (NIV)

Fear is a master of disguise and *often* wears a smile. From a human perspective, the most unlikely people can be totally possessed by fear. The rich. The famous. The powerful. The beautiful, gifted, intelligent, and strong. All too often, every superficial thing we long for is in truth only a mask defiant men and women wear to conceal the overwhelming fear that torments them every night as they struggle for sleep.

Proverbs 3:21-26 "... preserve sound judgment and discretion... Then you will go on your way in safety, and your foot will not stumble. When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, for the LORD will be at your side and will keep your foot from being snared." (NIV)

Psalms 4:8 "In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety." (NIV)

Isaiah 57:20,21 "But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. 'There is no peace,' says my God, 'for the wicked.'" (NIV)

Uncounted are the number of powerful, wealthy, beautiful people who put on a brave, carefree face for the world to envy but tremble under their covers in bed at night. It's a dirty little secret they keep that feeds their insecurity nightly, so in the morning it has grown just a little bit bigger and a little bit stronger. If you look past the mask it is there, hiding behind eyes that cannot lie. And it is most evident when they smile, with lips pointing in the right direction towards perfect cheekbones, but sad eyes that cannot sustain the myth.

Revelation 3:17 “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’
But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.”
(NIV)

Job 20:4-8 “Surely you know how it has been from of old, ever since mankind was placed on the earth, that the mirth of the wicked is brief, the joy of the godless lasts but a moment. Though the pride of the godless person reaches to the heavens and his head touches the clouds, he will perish forever, like his own dung; those who have seen him will say, ‘Where is he?’ Like a dream he flies away, no more to be found, banished like a vision of the night.” (NIV)

This especially includes those people of influence whose actions (and inactions) bring the things of darkness sweeping across the fallen world like a plague. The dictator, the pop-star, the president, the laureate – some wielding weapons of obvious destruction, other pushing subtle vices just as deadly – all know how to smile for the cameras. It’s their talent for showmanship that allows them to claw their way to the top of their chosen heap.

But when the cameras are in their cases, and the audience has gone home, and the make-up comes off, and the wardrobe is at the cleaners, these lost people who influence millions are left alone staring at the mirror holding in a terrible secret – they embraced the darkness to achieve every dream, and in all their success they find no Joy or Peace, only a throbbing emptiness that sounds their ultimate defeat.

Mark 8:36 “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?” (NASB)

These men and women know from firsthand experience the things of this world cannot satisfy or fulfill. They have it all, and it’s not enough. And all that’s left is an inescapable knowledge that when God finally makes all things right, the houses they have dishonored themselves to build will fall with a sickening thud, leaving them to face the judgment of almighty God alone, without a Savior. This truth lies sleepless in every corner of their minds and taints their every thought with a burning fear. They are then left with a choice: To repent and turn to the light, or to speed headlong into the darkness, frantically searching for anything to distract their anxious minds from their guilty consciences.

Matthew 7:24-27 “Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine (*Jesus*) and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell – and great was its fall.” (NASB)

Romans 2:9-11 “There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil... but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good... For there is no partiality with God.” (NASB)

Isaiah 59:4-8 “No one calls for justice; no one pleads his case with integrity. They rely on empty arguments and speak lies; they conceive trouble and give birth to evil... Their deeds are evil deeds... Their thoughts are evil thoughts; ruin and destruction mark their ways. The way of peace they do not know; there is no justice in their paths. They have turned them into crooked roads; no one who walks in them will know peace.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

But fear has only one antidote: Faith. We can run to every quick fix or self-help program this world has to offer looking for something to give us relief, and for a little while they might even help, but their powers to distract us from the pounding of our injured conscience eventually fails and leaves us with a fear twice as powerful as before, as we find ourselves wandering deeper and deeper into the black hole of darkness. Only one force has the strength to release us from the death grip of fear – the liberating power of faith in God through His Son Jesus Christ.

Matthew 8:26 “... You of little faith, why are you so afraid?...” (NIV)

Job 11:13-18 “... if you devote your heart to him (*God*)... if you put away the sin that is in your hand... then you will lift up your face without shame; you will stand firm and without fear... You will be secure, because there is hope...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Hebrews 10:22 “let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience...” (NIV)

Psalms 46:1-3 “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains quake at its swelling pride.” (NASB)

Psalms 34:4 “I sought the LORD, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears.” (NIV)

Just as hope is one of the major, recurring themes of God’s Word, so is fear. God understands we begin our journey in this life, not bathed in His glorious light, but lost in the shadows of darkness. And this is legitimately frightening, even for the most pure of heart. So over and over again in His Word He comforts us, and tells us not to be afraid. He is. He cares. We are His beloved children. And He is greater than the darkness.

Isaiah 41:10-14 “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand... For I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, do not fear; I will help you. Do not be afraid...” (NIV)

Joshua 1:9 “... Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.” (NIV)

Isaiah 35:3,4 “Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, ‘Be strong, do not fear; your God... will come to save you.’ ” (NIV)

Isaiah 51:7-13 “... Do not fear the reproach of mere mortals or be terrified by their insults... Who are you that you fear mere mortals, human beings who are but grass, that you forget the LORD your Maker, who stretches out the heavens and who lays the foundations of the earth, that you live in constant terror every day...” (NIV)

Isaiah 43:1-5 “But now, this is what the LORD says – he who created you... he who formed you... ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior... Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you... Do not be afraid, for I am with you...’ ” (NIV)

The Bible is full of stories of men and women overcoming their fears by placing their faith in the holy God who loves them. Some faced legitimate distress brought on by the evil and injustice of the world. Other faced the fear that comes from defying the voice of God. All found strength, courage, and hope to overcome their fears when they put their trust in a loving, Heavenly Father.

Psalms 23:1-4 “The LORD is my shepherd... Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me.” (NASB)

Psalms 56:3,4 “When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Deuteronomy 20:3,4 “... Hear, Israel: Today you are going into battle against your enemies. Do not be fainthearted or afraid; do not panic or be terrified by them. For the LORD your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory.” (NIV)

Psalms 3:3-6 “But you, LORD, are a shield around me... I will not fear though tens of thousands assail me on every side.” (NIV)

Jeremiah 51:46 “Do not lose heart or be afraid when rumors are heard in the land; one rumor comes this year, another the next, rumors of violence...” (NIV)

Romans 8:15 “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba (*Aramaic for “Daddy”*), Father.’ ” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Isaiah 12:2 “Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The LORD... is my strength and my song...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Throughout His Word God calms our fears with a message of love. He quiets our fears by assuring us He will never leave us, nor will He ever forsake us. We are not abandoned to the darkness. His light illuminates an unmistakable path for us to follow leading directly into His outstretched arms. There is no reason or excuse to get lost.

Psalm 119:105 “Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path.” (NASB)

The only way to miss the light in the darkness is to close our eyes. The only way to miss the love of God in the fallen world is to reject His grace. There is no need to be afraid of the things of darkness, because they are powerless against the things of light.

Deuteronomy 31:6-8 “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified... for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you... The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.” (NIV)

John 16:33 “These things I (*Jesus*) have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.” (NASB)

In the physical realm, darkness is powerless over light. There is no place on earth where, if you switch on a light bulb, the darkness will overwhelm the light and prevent illumination. Light always, without fail, penetrates the darkness.

In the spiritual realm, it’s exactly the same. Darkness is powerless over light. There is nothing possessed by the world’s darkness that can overcome God’s light. The only thing that can snuff out light is our decisions to do wrong. And so we should never be afraid of the dark.

Psalm 27:1-3 “The LORD is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid?... Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then will I be confident.” (NIV)

Psalm 25:4-9 “Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long. Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you, LORD, are good. Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.” (NIV)

Micah 7:7,8 “But as for me, I will watch expectantly for the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me. Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy. Though I fall I will rise; though I dwell in darkness, the LORD is a light for me.” (NASB)

There is, however, one thing God’s Word tells us to fear: God himself. Now this type of “fear” is not the fear we have been examining that comes from defiance of God. Nor is it the fear we experience in a movie theater when the monster jumps out of the closet. We are told to “fear” God in the sense that we respect Him. We give Him the awe and reverence that are His due as the holy God who created and will one day righteously judge the entire world.

Isaiah 8:12,13 “... do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it. The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear...” (NIV)

Luke 12:4-7 “*I (Jesus)* tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” (NIV)

This “fear” of God is a wonderful thing! It creates the humble hearts we need in order to learn from God. In fact, the “fear of God” is described in the Word of God as “the beginning of wisdom” – a mindset of humility and respect that allows us to learn. It’s in reality an expression of our love for God and the hope we place in His unfailing love, which are God’s great delight.

Psalm 111:10 “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise.” (NIV)

Psalm 147:11 “the LORD delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love.” (NIV)

Psalm 25:14 “The LORD confides in those who fear him...” (NIV)

This wonderful, healthy “fear of God” displaces all of the unhealthy, debilitating fear we know in the world. It shifts our focus from the darkness to the light, and puts everything we experience into its proper perspective. We see that, in this life, only God deserves our respect, awe, and legitimate fear. Everything else is powerless against Him. There is no need to fear the things of this world, when we have given all of our reverence to the One who made it. If we fear God, even in the heart of the world’s darkness, we will experience light. The healthy fear of a holy, loving God destroys all other unhealthy fears in a desperate, fallen world.

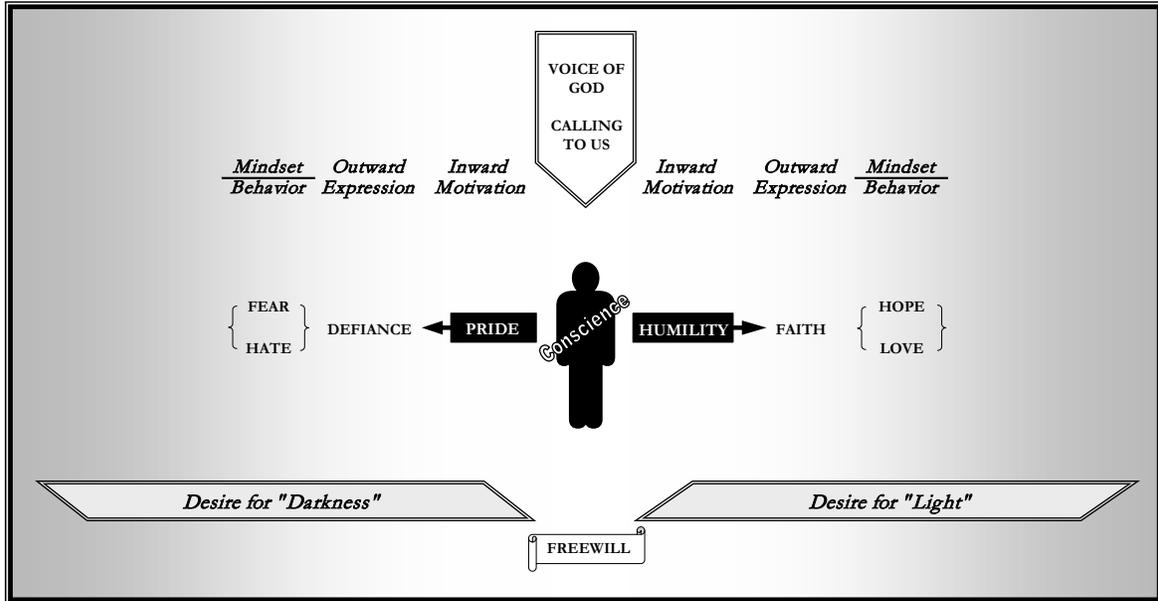
Psalm 112:1-8 “... Blessed are those who fear the LORD... Even in darkness light dawns... They will have no fear of bad news; their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the Lord. Their hearts are secure, they will have no fear...” (NIV)

Psalm 76:7 “It is you (*God*) alone who are to be feared...” (NIV)

Hebrews 12:28,29 “... worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire.’ ” (NIV)

Now we’ve seen how lives characterized by faith or defiance affect our thoughts. We either live our lives with minds set on an empowering hope or a disempowering fear. How does faith or defiance affect our actions?

*Two behaviors: Love or Hate
(the effect on our words and deeds).*



Hate	Love
The effect of Defiance or Faith upon our behavior	
<i>Born from defiant hearts and fearful minds</i>	<i>Born from faithful hearts and hopeful minds</i>
<i>Directed towards both God & others</i>	<i>Directed towards both God & others</i>
<i>Leaves us isolated & unfulfilled</i>	<i>Builds lasting, fulfilling relationships</i>

Faith-filled hearts create hope-filled minds, and when the heart and mind are filled with faith and hope, what spills over into our behavior is: Love. This is the Christ-like love we saw in Chapter 5 that has two complementary but very different expressions – love for God and love for our fellow mankind. Faith bathes the mind in God’s light, and the result is a mental state of hope. A mind set on hope instructs the body to speak words and carry out deeds modeled after the love of Jesus.

Colossians 1:3-5 “We give thanks to God... for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have... because of the hope... which you previously heard in the word of truth...” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 4:1-16 “... we do not lose heart. Rather... by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God... For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not

abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body... Therefore we do not lose heart..." (NIV)

1 Timothy 1:5 "But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." (NASB)

We explored the love of Jesus in some detail in Chapter 5. We are to love God in the sense we trust Him, because He is worthy of our trust. In both good times and bad, we trust God will be faithful to His promises, and this helps us overcome the various kinds of problems we encounter with our changing circumstances.

Matthew 22:35-39 "One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?' Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.'" (NIV)

Proverbs 3:5,6 "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight." (NIV)

Psalms 37:3-40 "Trust in the LORD and do good... Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He will do it. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light... Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him... the humble will... delight themselves in abundant prosperity... the LORD sustains the righteous. The LORD knows the days of the blameless, and their inheritance will be forever... Wait for the LORD and keep His way, and He will exalt you... the salvation of the righteous is from the LORD; He is their strength in time of trouble. The LORD helps them and delivers them; He delivers them from the wicked and saves them, because they take refuge in Him." (NASB)

In contrast to this type of trusting love for God, we are called to love our fellow mankind even if they are distrustful, in the sense we are merciful and forgiving. We treat others with a Christ-like love whether they deserve it or not, and this helps us overcome the various kinds of problems we encounter in our relationships.

Matthew 22:35-40 "One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?' Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'" (NIV)

Romans 12:10-21 "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor... rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep... Never pay back evil for evil to anyone... If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God,

for it is written, 'VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,' says the Lord. 'BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (NASB)

Colossians 3:12-15 "... put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts..." (NASB)

Our love for God motivates our love for our fellow man. Our love for our fellow man demonstrates our love for God. They are two sides of the same coin, the coin of the love of Christ.

1 John 4:11-21 "Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another... We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister." (NIV)

To love as Jesus did is a high calling, and on our own strength it is impossible. But when we humbly allow God's Word and Spirit to light and guide our way, our hearts become full of faith, and our minds become full of hope, and from this foundation of faith and hope the love of Jesus quite naturally springs. A faithful heart and hopeful mind empowered by God's Word and Spirit can bear no other fruit.

2 Peter 1:2-10 "Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him... For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins... as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble;" (NASB)

Romans 8:6-37 "... the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace... And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose... in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us." (NASB)

In the “Fruit of the Spirit,” which we explored in Chapter 5, we saw perhaps the best description of the words and deeds of a man or woman who by God’s Spirit emulates the love of Jesus – patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. What better portrait do we have of the love that grows from a heart full of faith and a mind full of hope?

Galatians 5:19-22 “The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like... But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

What grows from a heart full of defiance and a mind full of fear? It can only be the opposite of love: Hate. We feel the voice of God calling to us, and we see His light in the distance. But instead of running to it, we choose to retreat deeper into the darkness, because therein lie the things we desire. In our pride, we harden our hearts with defiance of the living God, and as a result, fear begins to seep into our minds like water through a leaky hull. And as our ships ride progressively lower in the water, our fearful minds become increasingly insecure about ourselves and cowardly in considering the alternatives presented by our circumstances. The end results are words and deeds full of hate.

John 3:19,20 “... Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.” (NIV)

Matthew 24:10 “... many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other,” (NIV)

Proverbs 18:3 “When wickedness comes, so does contempt...” (NIV)

The love that comes from following Jesus can be expressed towards both God and our fellow mankind. In the same way, the hate that comes from descending into the darkness can be expressed towards both God and our fellow mankind, with hate for God motivating hate for others, and hate for others demonstrating hate for God. They become the heads and tails of the currency of darkness: Hate.

1 John 2:6-11 “Whoever claims to live in him (*God*) must live as Jesus did... Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness. Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble. But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.” (NIV)

We hate God in the sense we reject Him in favor of the things of the world. This rejection does not necessarily begin with an ill will towards God. We've got nothing against Him. We're just much more interested in the loot to be had in a fallen world. This is where our journey begins, with a nice cozy relationship with the ways of the world and a comfortable distance from God.

James 4:4 "... don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God?..." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

As we sail out into the darkness seeking plunder, the temporary distractions of the world become our gods and masters, and we worship faithfully at their feet, praying for good weather and fair winds. If a little storm comes up, we respond with a compromise here and an indiscretion there, until we learn to sail the waters of the fallen world with ease and precision.

Philippians 3:18,19 "For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is their shame, who set their minds on earthly things." (NASB)

Titus 3:3 "At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another." (NIV)

Matthew 6:24 "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." (NASB)

The problem is: The compromises and indiscretions required to keep our ship moving forward breed like rats in a cargo hold. Their number and size increase exponentially with every voyage, until they overrun the ship. The fuel that empowers men and women who successfully pillage the dark seas of a fallen world is sin, and the miles per gallon we enjoy steadily decrease with every journey, such that it takes more and more fuel to go the same distance, until the sins we are capable of committing in order to find some temporary distraction are unimaginable.

Psalms 73:3-8 "... the wicked... pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits. They scoff, and speak with malice..." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Over time this turns our tender hearts to defiant stones and our unsullied minds to fearful jelly, and what may have begun as an indifferent rejection of God in favor of a passionate embrace of the material finally becomes a vicious antagonism towards God as the emptiness of the darkness overwhelms us. We have our way with the world. Then the world has its way with us. And the change wrought upon our ears

transforms the gentle voice we playfully dismissed at the beginning (so we could eagerly explore the unknown darkness) into an all-knowing, holy God we utterly despise.

Proverbs 14:2 “He who walks in his uprightness fears the LORD, but he who is devious in his ways despises Him.” (NASB)

Romans 8:7 “the sinful mind is hostile to God...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

This underlying disrespect and antagonism towards God inspires an outward disrespect and antagonism towards our fellow man. Just as love for God motivates love for others, so hate for God motivates hate for the unfortunate men and women who cross our paths. Defiant hearts and fearful minds come to hate the God against whom they have rebelled, and express their hatred for God in the way they treat His creation.

Psalm 50:16-20 “But to the wicked person, God says... ‘You hate my instruction and cast my words behind you. When you see a thief, you join with him; you throw in your lot with adulterers. You use your mouth for evil and harness your tongue to deceit. You sit and testify against your brother and slander your own mother’s son’ ” (NIV)

Psalm 10:2-7 “In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak, who are caught in the schemes he devises. He boasts of the cravings of his heart... In his pride... there is no room for God... His mouth is full of lies and threats; trouble and evil are under his tongue.” (NIV)

This hatred is expressed most virulently towards those who are seeking the light. Proud, defiant hearts see a man or woman following Jesus, and it stings their conscience and stirs their fears, so with hateful cowardice they strike, attempting to destroy the symbol of their ultimate defeat. This is how they treated Jesus, and how they will treat those who follow Him.

Proverbs 29:10 “The bloodthirsty hate a person of integrity and seek to kill the upright.” (NIV)

Amos 5:10 “There are those who hate the one who upholds justice in court and detest the one who tells the truth.” (NIV)

John 7:7 “The world... hates me (*Jesus*) because I testify that its works are evil.” (NIV)

Matthew 10:22 “You (*the disciples*) will be hated by everyone because of me (*Jesus*)...” (NIV)

Sometimes, those who hate do so overtly, with the torch, cudgel, and noose. But many times hate is carried out covertly, with quiet words like slow poison or sniper bullets. As is true with fear, hate can wear many disguises. Hate lives perhaps most comfortably behind passive faces and easy smiles.

Psalm 28:3 “... the wicked... speak cordially with their neighbors but harbor malice in their hearts.” (NIV)

Notice the dramatic effect our desire for either darkness or light has on our hearts, minds, and behavior. When our desire is for the things of the darkness, we develop *hard (defiant) hearts* and *weak (fearful) minds*, and this gives birth to words and deeds of hate. When our desire is for the things of the light, we develop *tender (faithful) hearts* and *strong (hopeful) minds*, and this gives birth to words and deeds of love. More on this later.

Proverbs 4:23 “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.” (NASB)

Matthew 13:15 “For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I (*Jesus*) would heal them.” (NIV)

Hebrews 3:12,13 “See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” (NIV)

Ephesians 4:1-32 “... walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love... Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor... be put away from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

2 Chronicles 34:27 “Because your heart was tender and you humbled yourself before God when you heard His words... and because you humbled yourself before Me... I truly have heard you,” declares the LORD.” (NASB)

If love for others can take many forms (such as patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control), so can hate for others. Our impatience, unkindness, malevolence, faithlessness, harshness, and rashness are simply different faces of the hate we sometimes harbor for our fellow man. All of these things – from the destructive words of the local gossip, to the unfaithfulness of the adulterous spouse, to the crimes of the hardened criminal – are ultimately an expression of the primeval hate that boils up from the churning waters of a defiant heart and fearful mind.

Mark 7:14-22 “Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, ‘Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them... Don’t you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? For it doesn’t go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body... What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come – sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.’ ” (NIV)

These many different expressions of hate for our fellow mankind are ultimately demonstrations of the hate we have for God (just as our love for others is a demonstration of our love for God). When we choose to set our hearts and minds in defiance of God, we come to hate Him, and this hate for God opens the floodgates to hate for others in all of its various guises. We give in to the desire for the temporary distractions of the fallen world and become enslaved to the darkness, with hearts hardened by defiance and minds diseased by fear. Darkness masters a rebellious heart and twists every thought with insecurity and cowardice, so every word and deed becomes an avatar of hate.

Romans 1:21-31 “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened... They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy.” (NIV)

2 Peter 2:9-19 “... the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment... This is especially true of those who follow the corrupt desire of the sinful nature and despise authority. Bold and arrogant... these men blaspheme in matters they do not understand. They are like brute beasts, creatures of instinct, born only to be caught and destroyed, and like beasts they too will perish. They will be paid back with harm for the harm they have done. Their idea of pleasure is to carouse in broad daylight. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their pleasures while they feast with you. With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed – an accursed brood! They have left the straight way and wandered off... These men are springs without water and mists driven by a storm. Blackest darkness is reserved for them. For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity – for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Ironically, the person a defiant man or woman ends up hating the most is: Themselves. Those who choose to live their lives in defiance of the living God receive from the darkness they embrace fearful minds and hateful words and deeds. In the beginning, this hatred is expressed towards God and other people. But hatred is a boomerang that never fails to return to its master with a vengeance. We throw it out there, and even if it strikes its target, it comes sailing back to clobber us just as hard right between the eyes.

Ezekiel 20:43 "... you will remember your conduct and all the actions by which you have defiled yourselves, and you will loathe yourselves for all the evil you have done." (NIV)

Ezekiel 6:9 "... They will loathe themselves for the evil they have done and for all their detestable practices." (NIV)

While love allows us to build lasting, fulfilling relationships with both God and others, hate leaves us cold and alone and desperately unsatisfied. Hate becomes a cancer that eats us up from the inside, until there is nothing left but an empty shell. It burns hot for a finite period of time, but once all that is good is consumed, all that is left is a gaping, vacuous emptiness. Hate is an unsatisfying meal that creates a destructive hunger, and so God calls us to rid ourselves of hate, along with each and every one of its alter egos, so we can be filled with something more and something better.

Ephesians 4:31,32 "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (NIV)

Colossians 3:5-16 "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed... You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie... clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts... And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly... And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Ezekiel 18:30-32 "... I (*God*) will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit... For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!" (NIV)

Haggai 1:5,6 "Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.' " (NIV)

Isaiah 9:18-20 "Surely wickedness burns like a fire... On the right they will devour, but still be hungry; on the left they will eat, but not be satisfied. Each will feed on the flesh of their own offspring;" (NIV)

1 Peter 2:1 "Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind." (NIV)

But how? How do we do this? These embodiments of hate – selfishness, greed, anger, and lust – are so thoroughly ingrained in us by the darkness of a fallen world, to rid ourselves of them is not like giving up Monday Night Football on the weekends. It’s more like kicking a smack habit when we’re surrounded by junkies, free dope, and a government sponsored needle program. How can we rid ourselves of the things of the fallen world and fill ourselves with the things of the living God?

*Setting the palette with Faith
(where it all ends).*

The power to rid ourselves of hate comes from faith. When we humbly choose to set our desires upon the things of the light and place our trust in the living God, this faith fills our thoughts with hope and colors our words and deeds with love. As hope pours into our minds and love pours out of our actions, we are purged of fear and hate. Where there is faith, hope, and love, there can be no fear. Where there is no fear, there is no hate. Faith fills with hope and love, which drive out fear and hate!

1 John 4:18 “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear...” (NIV)

The voice of God calls to us. We feel the call within our hearts, and our conscience assures us that this holy God truly loves us. We are then presented with a choice, between what God’s Word describes with utmost simplicity as light or darkness. If we choose the light, the darkness is extinguished. The humility inwardly expressed by this decision conquers pride. The faith outwardly expressed by this decision breaks defiance. The hope that fills our minds eliminates fear. The love that fills our words and deeds overcomes hate. Where once was darkness, pride, defiance, fear, and hate, there is now light, humility, faith, hope, and love. We set our desires upon the light, and the qualities of light rid ourselves of the qualities of darkness.

There is no middle ground between these two opposing forces. We can’t have one foot in the darkness and one foot in the light, like a stage actor stepping into a spotlight. That might work in the physical realm but not in the spiritual realm. In the end, the conscience of every human being encounters the voice of God, and we are forced to choose between His light and the world’s darkness. It is impossible to overemphasize the impact of this foundational choice. It determines at the most fundamental level the outcome of our lives.

Revelation 3:15,16 “I (*Jesus*) know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth.” (NIV)

James 4:8-10 “Come near to God and he will come near to you... purify your hearts, you double-minded... Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.” (NIV)

Luke 16:13 “No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” (NASB)

Deuteronomy 30:19,20 “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the LORD your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days...” (NASB)

Joshua 24:15 “... choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...” (NIV)

The lead-in to this section was an image of a painter setting his or her palette with color in anticipation of a portrait about to be created. Before an artist attempts a new work, he envisions the finished piece in his head, and from this he extracts the colors he will need to fulfill his vision. Will he paint with oil, gouache, or watercolor? Will the tones be bright, neutral, or muted? Will the reflectance of the medium carry a glossy or matte finish?

All of these things and more must be considered so the palette may be set with the colors the finished piece will require. A palette set with dull shades of gray will not be much use if you want to capture a garden in bloom on a sunny afternoon. Shiny primary colors do not ordinarily lend themselves to images of night. Of course there are exceptions to every rule, but the principle is this: Your painting is doomed from the start if you set your palette with the wrong colors.

Your life is doomed from the start if you set your character with the wrong qualities. You may desire true happiness. Passion and contentment may be the vision you have for life when you set off on the journey. But if your subsequent choices fill your heart and mind with the things of darkness, you haven't got a chance.

The qualities of your character are set by the things you choose to treasure. If you treasure the things of darkness, if your prideful desire is for the temporary distractions of a fallen world, then this foundational choice limits the colors from which you may paint the portrait of your life to the shades of darkness – defiance, fear, and hate. And with only these things in which to dip your brush, you cannot reasonably expect to paint a pretty picture.

Luke 12:34 “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (NASB)

Proverbs 4:23 “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.” (NASB)

A painter decides what he wants his painting to be, then he sets his palette accordingly. We have to decide what we want our *lives* to be, then set our hearts and minds accordingly. Our goals determine the tools we assemble in order to achieve our objectives. And so we must first determine our goals, and then select the tools

befitting our objectives. If we choose the wrong tools, our commission is doomed from the start.

A painter will never capture a vision of the rising sun, with all the colors of the dawn shattered across the horizon, if he begins his work by squeezing only black, brown, and gray onto his palette. We will never realize a vision of a happy life, full of Joy and Peace, if we begin our journey with characters oozing defiance, fear, and hate. If our brush is loaded with black, brown, and gray, we can only expect to paint the dark. If our soul is loaded with defiance, fear, and hate, we can only expect to experience the darkness.

To paint the dawn, we need the colors of light set upon a palette, and a black background to paint over. We are born into a fallen world, and this provides the dark canvas against which we live out our lives. But our portrait begins, not with the first stroke of the brush, *but with a setting of the palette*, with either faith, hope, and love, or defiance, fear, and hate. These become the wheel of primary colors we mix to create the spectrum that will illustrate the journey of our lives. Faith, hope, and love create one set of colors with which we can only capture light, while defiance, fear, and hate create a totally different set of colors that can only capture darkness.

These colors are oil and water. They do not mix. Faith cannot be mixed with defiance, to create a blending of the two. Likewise there is not a hopeful shade of fear, or a hateful shade of love. They stand like fighters at opposite sides of the ring, and at the end of the contest only one team will be left standing.

If we truly wish to rid ourselves of the different embodiments of hate – the selfishness, greed, anger, and lust (among other things) that plague our lives – and if we truly wish to be free from the fear that cripples our thoughts and is the impetus for our hate, there is a way: We stop everything we’re doing and reset our palettes. We humbly choose to receive the light flowing from the Word of the God who calls to us. And by placing our trust in Him, we get out a fire hose and blast every last drop of defiance, fear, and hate from within us, so no residue of darkness remains. Then we reset the fresh, clean palette with the things of light – a faithful heart, a hopeful mind, and loving words and deeds.

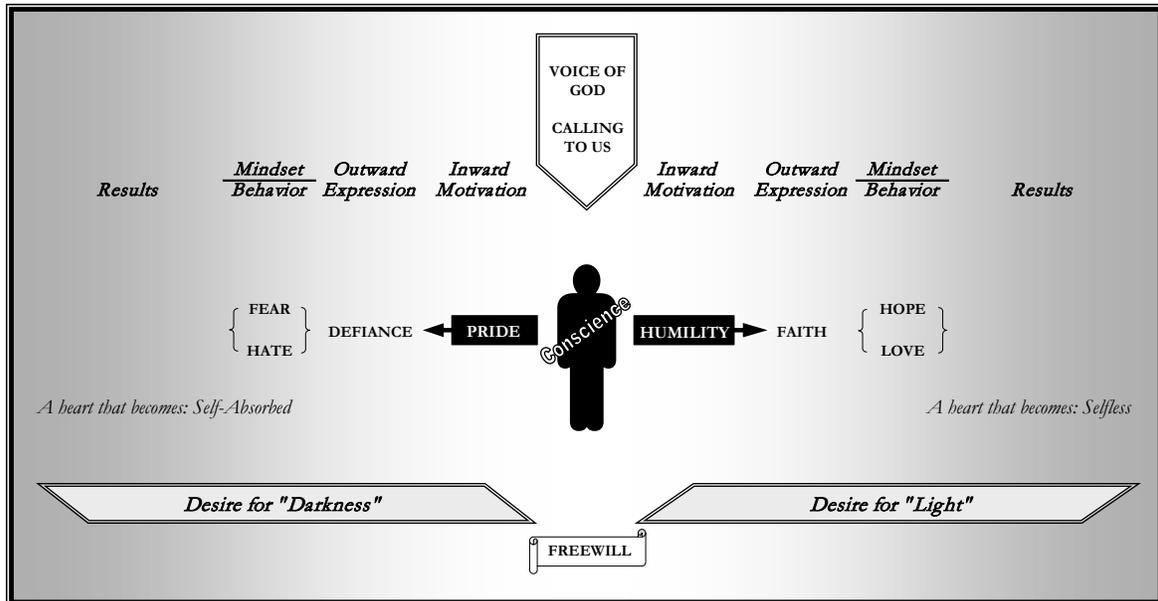
With wells of faith, hope, and love set on our palette, we are now prepared to realize the vision of life that is our dream. We possess the rare and precious colors required to capture the passion and contentment we envision for the portrait of our lives. And with faith, hope, and love splashed across the canvas with every stroke of the brush, there can be only one end to our creation.

FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE CREATE JOY AND PEACE.

A fundamental transformation.

The Joy and Peace we long for are the results of humbly choosing to live our lives with faith, hope, and love. These three things utterly transform us at the most fundamental levels, the way a painting is changed forever by altering the colors set on the palette. And it is through this transformation we are able to experience Joy “inexpressible” and Peace “surpassing comprehension.”

Faith transforms the heart: From Self-Absorbed to Selfless.



From Self-Absorbed	To Selfless
The transformation of the heart by Faith	
<i>Focus on the self</i>	<i>Focus on God & others</i>
<i>Grows to a blinding Self-Obsession</i>	<i>Brings a clear & accurate perspective to all things</i>
<i>Enslaves the heart</i>	<i>Liberates the heart</i>

We are born into the darkness of a fallen world, and in our natural state, before we choose to walk humbly with God in His light, it is our natural instinct to be selfish. Our eyes are focused on ourselves and in satisfying self-led desires without regard for others. We can think of this as being *self-absorbed*. Our primary motivation is to gratify ourselves without consideration for the interests of other people.

Ephesians 2:1-3 “... you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world... All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and

following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Romans 2:6-11 “God ‘will repay each person according to what they have done’... for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil... but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good... For God does not show favoritism.” (NIV)

Left unchecked, self-absorption can turn to *self-obsession*. What begins as a narrow focus on the self and a negligent disregard for others becomes an exclusive focus on the self and a reckless disregard for others. Our vision degenerates from near-sightedness to blindness; and we tear through life like a wrecking ball, destroying anything and anyone who stands in our path.

James 3:14-16 “But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it... For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.” (NIV)

1 John 2:11 “But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 13:4,5 “Love is... not self-seeking...” (NIV)

Faith transforms the self-absorbed heart into a *selfless* heart. Our focus shifts from gratifying ourselves to pleasing the God in whom we have placed our trust, and (as part of our trust in Him) to showing consideration for all of God’s creation. Our vision expands from a narrow tunnel of self-interest to a wide panorama that encompasses the interests of God, our fellow mankind, and our own legitimate hopes and dreams.

Romans 8:5,6 “Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires... the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace;” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

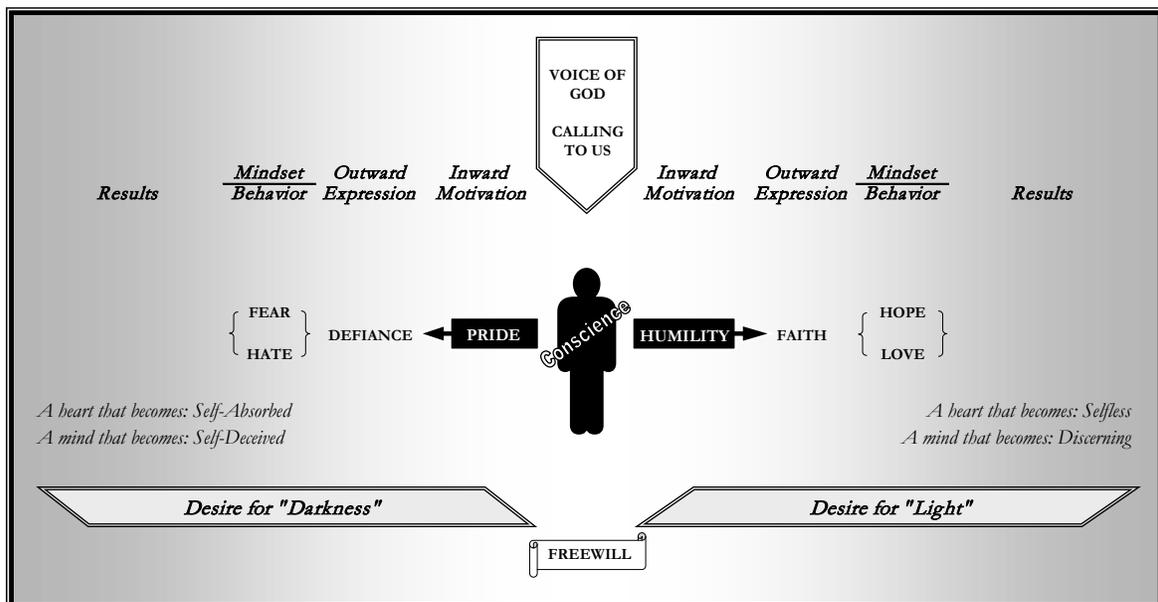
Philippians 2:3,4 “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

In trusting God to keep His Word, our faith frees our hearts to set aside the selfish desires we so often cling to, and this new selfless perspective enables us to walk boldly into God’s light with confidence and courage. We choose to trust God. This transfers the focus of our hearts from within to without. Our desire is to please God, not ourselves, and we are released from the chains of self-absorption that bind us to sinful behavior. Faith frees our eyes from an unblinking stare into a distorted mirror, and redirects them to a balanced, clear, and accurate perspective of God, ourselves, and the world around us. A selfless heart is a liberated heart.

Galatians 5:1-26 “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery... The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love... You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love... So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature... The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like... Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

John 8:31,32 “... Jesus said, ‘If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’ ” (NIV)

Hope transforms the mind: From Self-Deceived to Discerning.



From Self-Deceived	To Discerning
The transformation of the mind by Hope	
<i>The relief sought by a fearful mind</i>	<i>The wisdom gained by a hopeful mind</i>
<i>Begins with Self-Justification...</i>	<i>The ability to distinguish between right & wrong...</i>
<i>... and ends with Self-Righteousness</i>	<i>... and the inability to be deceived</i>
<i>Limits the mind</i>	<i>Empowers the mind</i>

A self-absorbed heart creates a *self-deceived* mind. When we defiantly choose to remain in the darkness, and the inevitable fear begins to seep into the cracks in our minds,

we have to deal with the resulting insecurity and cowardice somehow. As our defiant hearts become more and more self-absorbed, our fearful minds struggle increasingly to find anything that will offer relief. And in the darkness our only options are the lies and deceptions of the fallen world.

Hebrews 3:12,13 “See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 3:18,19 “Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become ‘fools’ so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight...” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 11:3-15 “But I (*Paul*) am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. For if one comes and preaches... a different gospel... such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness...” (NASB)

Matthew 24:4,5 “Jesus answered: ‘Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name... and will deceive many.’ ” (NIV)

2 Peter 2:1-20 “... there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies... Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with false words... forsaking the right way they have gone astray... For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires... promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved. For if after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first.” (NASB)

And so we latch on to all manners of falsehood in order to prop up our burdened minds. The process often begins with *self-justification*. We bite into various philosophies and false religions that provide us with excuses to do things we know deep down inside are wrong. This provides us with a psychological band-aid to stem the tide of blood flowing from a wounded conscience, and essentially buys us a little time to indulge ourselves in whatever petty distraction suits our fancy, until God inevitably kicks our crutches out from under us.

2 Timothy 4:3,4 “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.” (NASB)

Colossians 2:2-23 “... be encouraged... attaining to all the wealth that comes from full assurance of understanding... so that no one may delude you with persuasive

argument... See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ... Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize... why... do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, 'Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!'... in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion... but are of no value..." (NASB)

Romans 16:17,18 "... watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people." (NIV)

Jeremiah 29:8,9 "Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,' declares the LORD." (NIV)

Jeremiah 8:5-17 "Why then have these people turned away?... They cling to deceit; they refuse to return. I have listened attentively, but they do not say what is right. None of them repent of their wickedness, saying, 'What have I done?' Each pursues their own course like a horse charging into battle... Since they have rejected the word of the LORD, what kind of wisdom do they have?... They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace. Are they ashamed of their detestable conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush. So they will fall among the fallen; they will be brought down when they are punished, says the LORD... 'See, I will send venomous snakes among you, vipers that cannot be charmed, and they will bite you,' declares the LORD." (NIV)

A next step can be *self-righteousness*. We've justified the wrongs our conscience knows we are committing, and so we falsely conclude all of our ways are worthy and good. Based upon a foundation of distortions and lies we convince ourselves we are just and right. From here, there are no boundaries, and accordingly, absolutely no end to the wrongs we will cheerfully commit without remorse. In becoming absorbed with ourselves we deceive ourselves, and lose ourselves in the darkness of a fallen world.

2 Timothy 3:2-17 "... men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant... holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; avoid such men as these. For among them are those who enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth... these men also oppose the truth, men of depraved mind... their folly will be obvious to all... But evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to

give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” (NASB)

John 16:1-3 “These things I (*Jesus*) have spoken to you, that you may be kept from stumbling. They will make you outcasts from the synagogue; but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God. These things they will do because they have not known the Father or Me.” (NASB)

Psalms 73:3-8 “... the wicked... pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits. They scoff, and speak with malice...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Jeremiah 49:16 “ ‘The terror you inspire and the pride of your heart have deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rocks, who occupy the heights of the hill. Though you build your nest as high as the eagle’s, from there I will bring you down,’ declares the LORD.” (NIV)

A selfless heart creates a *discerning* mind. When we faithfully choose to live in God’s light, and hope begins to pour into our minds, we gain tremendous wisdom and insight. The selfless act of placing our faith in God causes us to look outside of ourselves for truth, and so God’s guiding Spirit is allowed to lead us to God’s infallible Word. Then, with God’s Word as our light and God’s Spirit as our guide, we are granted a true, accurate understanding of who God is, who we are, how we relate to one another, and how the fallen world around us works. This knowledge entwines with the hope that comes from faith, and our darkened eyes are opened. We see things as they truly are, and through hope we have a confidence and courage that our holy, loving Heavenly Father will enable us to fulfill His plan and purpose. Together all of this grants us the wisdom we need to know right from wrong.

Proverbs 30:5,6 “Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.” (NIV)

Romans 12:2,3 “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will. For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.” (NIV)

Isaiah 48:17 “This is what the LORD says – your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: ‘I am the LORD your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go.’ ” (NIV)

Philippians 1:9,10 “And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,” (NIV)

We also have the discernment we need to know when we are being taken for a ride. You can't fool a selfless heart of faith working in harmony with a discerning mind of hope. We have the tools we need to see through all of the smoke the fallen world blows into our face. We are not so absorbed with ourselves that we cannot detect the lies and deceptions so subtly woven into the fabric of darkness. The selfless heart looks outward with an accurate perspective on all things and cannot be deceived.

Colossians 2:2-4 "... be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments." (NIV)

Proverbs 2:3-11 "indeed, if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will... find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding... Then you will understand what is right and just and fair – every good path. For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you." (NIV)

This is extraordinarily empowering! The selflessness of faith *frees* us. We are no longer bound to the chains of selfishness. The discernment of hope *empowers* us. We are no longer limited by the false leadings of self-deception. The selfish fool becomes a selfless man or woman of discernment. Now we are ready for action!

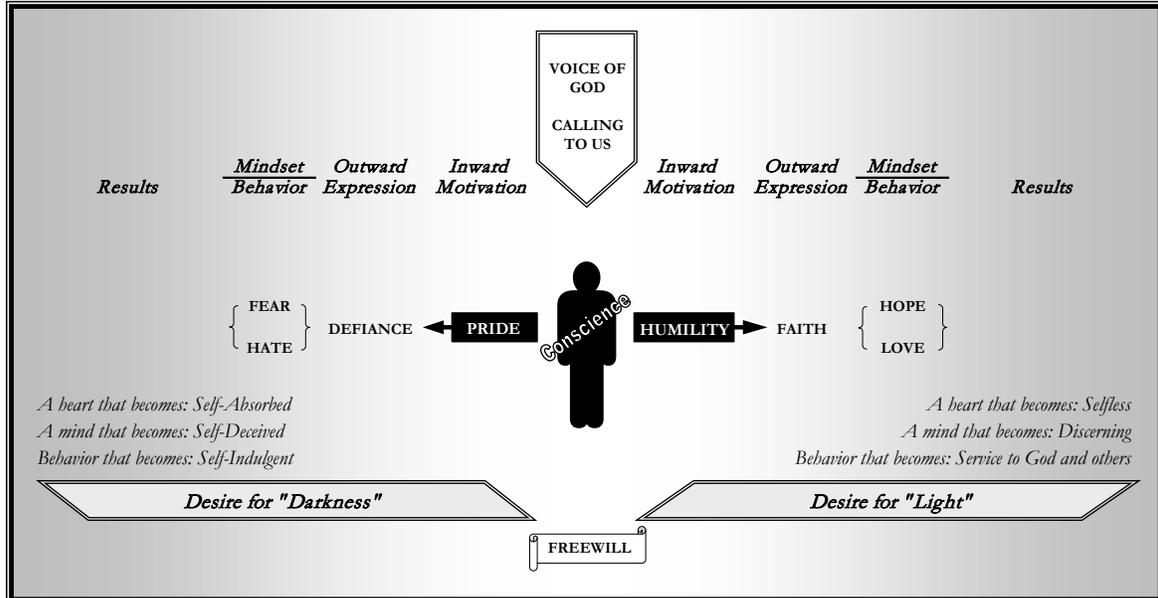
Titus 3:1-8 "... be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone. At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone." (NIV)

2 Corinthians 3:3-18 "... you are a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts... Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we... are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord..." (NIV)

Isaiah 52:2-12 "Shake off your dust... Free yourself from the chains on your neck... Burst into songs of joy together... for the LORD has comforted his people... the LORD will go before you, the God of Israel will be your rear guard." (NIV)

Psalm 130:3,4 “If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you.” (NIV)

Love transforms behavior: From Self-Indulgent to Serving God and Others.



From Self-Indulgent	To Serving God & Others
The transformation of behavior by Love	
<i>Provides temporary distraction from unhappiness</i>	<i>Brings lasting Joy & Peace</i>
<i>Forges the chains of the slavery of Pride...</i>	<i>Breaks the chains of the slavery of Pride...</i>
<i>... to which we become addicted...</i>	<i>... to which we were addicted...</i>
<i>... completing our bondage to...</i>	<i>... completing our escape from...</i>
<i>... the Darkness of the fallen world...</i>	<i>... the Darkness of the fallen world...</i>
<i>... preventing us from discovering God's purpose</i>	<i>... allowing us to fulfill God's purpose</i>

A heart absorbed with the self creates a mind deceived by the self, and this volatile mixture manifests itself in behavior that is intended for only one purpose – to indulge the self. We care only about ourselves. We learn to justify any action and believe what we are doing is righteous before God and man. The results are *self-indulgent* words and deeds intended to satisfy our longing for Joy and Peace, but in truth only providing temporary distractions from the inescapable unhappiness bred by selfish hearts and deluded minds.

Ephesians 2:3 “... we... all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.” (NASB)

Matthew 23:25,26 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.” (NIV)

There is a slavery to pride. It limits the choices we can make to only those that indulge the self. The prideful heart is self-absorbed, without the freedom to look outside the self for truth and meaning. This impedes the mind, restricting its focus to a narrow group of deceitful teachings (in the forms of philosophy, false religion, etc.) that justify and approve thoughts, words, and deeds that deep down inside injure our conscience like a lead pipe to the side of the head.

Titus 3:3 “At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.” (NIV)

Romans 16:17,18 “... watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.” (NIV)

2 Peter 2:9-19 “... the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment... This is especially true of those who follow the corrupt desire of the sinful nature and despise authority. Bold and arrogant... these men blaspheme in matters they do not understand. They are like brute beasts, creatures of instinct, born only to be caught and destroyed, and like beasts they too will perish. They will be paid back with harm for the harm they have done. Their idea of pleasure is to carouse in broad daylight. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their pleasures while they feast with you. With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed – an accursed brood! They have left the straight way and wandered off... These men are springs without water and mists driven by a storm. Blackest darkness is reserved for them. For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity – for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

We are left with lives enslaved to the pursuit of the temporary distractions of a fallen world. We need these indulgences the way a junkie needs a fix. If we don't have them, the totality of our lives is devoted to getting them. If we have them, the high momentarily distracts us from our misery, until we inevitably come crashing down. Then we are faced with the awful truth that in order to get that same high, we need more than we got the last time – more money, more fame, more power. We are bound to our addictions with chains as powerful as any narcotic, and from this place there is no escaping the darkness of the fallen world.

Ephesians 4:18,19 “They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

When we choose to give in to our desires for the things of darkness, we begin to indulge ourselves in all of the temporary distractions to be found in a fallen world. We then become addicted to these indulgences, which wrap themselves around us like shackles and bind us to the slavery of pride. These acts of self-indulgence complete our bondage to the darkness of the fallen world, which began when our defiant hearts became self-absorbed and our fearful minds became self-deceived. And it is this bondage to the darkness that prevents us from ever discovering and fulfilling God’s plan and purpose for our lives.

Love, born from a heart of faith and a mind of hope, liberates us from all of these things. Our selfless hearts are free to seek outside ourselves for truth. Our discerning minds are free to recognize truth in the Word of God and receive wisdom from the Spirit of God, so we can tell right from wrong, even when faced with all the smoke and mirrors the fallen world can angle at us. Then when we choose to love, the way Jesus loved God and His fellow mankind, the chains of self-indulgent behavior to which we were once addicted are broken, and we are free, able to escape the darkness of the fallen world.

Psalms 116:1-16 “I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live. The cords of death entangled me... I was overcome by distress and sorrow. Then I called on the name of the LORD... The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion... For you, LORD, have delivered me from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living. I trusted in the LORD... Truly I am your servant, LORD... you have freed me from my chains.” (NIV)

But what are we freed for? For what purpose has God prepared us? The act of faith transforms our hearts, from self-absorbed to selfless. The gift of hope (received from faith) transforms our minds, from self-deceived to discerning. For what use is a selfless, discerning man or woman best suited in the plan and purpose of God?

The answer can only be: *Serving God and others*. Humbly placing our faith in God breaks the pride that binds us to selfish desires for the things of darkness. The hope we gain when we discover all God is and all He has done for us pierces through the deceptions of the fallen world. Our hearts and minds are released from the insatiable need to indulge ourselves in temporary distractions.

A transformation at the most fundamental level takes place. We become selfless. We become discerning. We no longer desire the darkness. Our desire is for the light, and the One who created it. As faith and hope grow within us, our hearts and minds become equipped with wisdom and courage, which allow us to go out into the world and speak the truth in love. God grants us faith and hope so through the love they inspire we can serve Him and all He has created.

Galatians 5:1-13 “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery... The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love... You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Jeremiah 15:19 “... If you repent, I (*God*) will restore you that you may serve me...” (NIV)

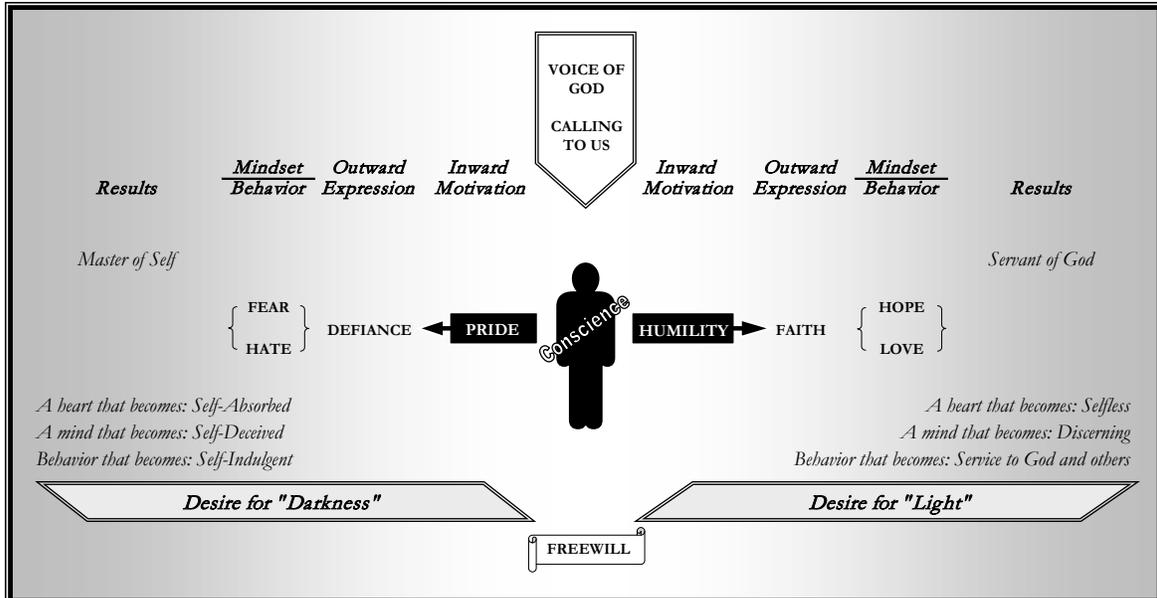
The choice to love transforms our behavior, from self-indulgent to serving God and others. We serve God, who brought us into the light and fills us with faith, hope, and love. We serve our fellow man and become a part of the light that defeats the darkness that holds the world in its destructive grip. This is what love is designed for, not to indulge the self, but to bless others.

1 Corinthians 13:4-8 “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails...” (NIV)

Luke 9:23-48 “Then he (*Jesus*) said to them all: ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?’... An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. Then he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest.’” (NIV)

And in setting aside the self and “taking up our cross” and following Jesus (by emulating His love for God and our fellow mankind) something utterly miraculous happens...

*The transformation’s purpose: From Master to Servant
(true greatness).*



From Master	To Servant
The transformation's purpose (true greatness)	
<i>Of no use in God's plan</i>	<i>Of great use in God's plan</i>
<i>Able only to force and break</i>	<i>Able to offer and mend</i>
<i>Focus is on the messenger</i>	<i>Focus is on the message</i>
<i>Follows own leading</i>	<i>Follows God's leading</i>
<i>Achieves meaningless, temporary wealth & recognition...</i>	<i>Achieves true, lasting greatness...</i>
<i>... from a fallen world that is passing away</i>	<i>... from the holy, loving God who endures forever</i>

... a self-absorbed, self-deceived, self-indulgent man or woman is transformed into a selfless, discerning *servant* of God. A servant! Not a fictional super-hero able to leap tall buildings and shoot laser beams from his eyeballs, but a humble follower of Jesus who serves God and his fellow mankind through selfless, discerning acts of love.

At first blush, this might seem somewhat anti-climactic or even downright disappointing. Why would God transform us into servants? And if we are being truthful, who really wants to be a servant? If we are going to reject the things of the world and devote ourselves to Christ, shouldn't we be transformed into giants among men, able to stride across the face of the earth and wipe out evil without ever breaking a sweat? Shouldn't the world break into spontaneous, thunderous applause every time we enter a room? Shouldn't we become masters of the fallen world who beat the darkness into submission?

Over and over again in this study we have seen that "God's ways are not our ways" and "His thoughts are not our thoughts." What is "valued among men" is worthless,

even detestable, in the eyes of God. God's way of doing things is nearly always exactly the opposite of our way of doing things.

Isaiah 55:8,9 “ ‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the LORD. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’ ” (NIV)

Luke 16:15 “He (*Jesus*) said to them (*the Pharisees*), ‘You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God's sight.’ ” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 3:19 “For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight...” (NIV)

God does not choose to transform us into titans capable of reshaping the foundations of the earth through super-human powers because God has no use for titans in His plan. That's not His way. God's way is to use simple, humble servants to reshape the foundations of the human heart through the power of love. We don't storm across the globe, wrestling evil to the ground like a long horn steer. We stand firm wherever God plants us and speak the truth in love, and when evil inevitably rages up against us, we love as Jesus did and bring light to a fallen world.

2 Corinthians 10:3,4 “For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world...” (NIV)

Romans 13:12-14 “... let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light... clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ...” (NIV)

Ephesians 6:10-17 “Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might... take up the full armor of God, so that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm therefore, HAVING GIRDED YOUR LOINS WITH TRUTH, and HAVING PUT ON THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, and having shod YOUR FEET WITH THE PREPARATION OF THE GOSPEL OF PEACE; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take the HELMET OF SALVATION, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” (NASB)

Romans 12:21 “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (NIV)

Luke 6:27,28 “... love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” (NIV)

Proverbs 25:21,22 “If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you.” (NIV)

1 Peter 3:8,9 “To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.” (NASB)

Why does God use humble, loving servants to carry out His work, rather than the spiritual equivalent of a goon squad? The answer has to do with freewill. It's not God's way to *force* goodness and light on the world, whether the world likes it or not. It's His way to *offer* goodness and light to the world, and then let His creation choose. Since force is not God's way, God has no use for the (in the worldly sense) powerful. He's not trying to *break* anything, so He doesn't need muscle bound henchmen.

God's way is to freely offer His grace to a world that desperately needs it and frequently refuses it. He's trying to *mend* something, so what He needs are humble servants who will take their stand and speak the truth in love, often in the face of injustice and ingratitude, so if the world will respond to God's offer of grace it can be healed and restored.

The power is therefore in the *message*, not the messenger, which only a selfless heart and discerning mind can genuinely and effectively deliver. It takes a servant's heart, not a master's ego, to illuminate the darkness of the fallen world through the love of Christ.

Ephesians 5:8-21 "... you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth)... Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." (NIV)

1 Thessalonians 5:5-23 "You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness... Therefore encourage one another and build each other up... Live in peace with each other... encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus... hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil... May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." (NIV)

It is in our nature to want to be the *master*. We want control – of ourselves, others, the world, and even God above – so we can order all things around us to our liking and thereby be happy. But the truth we must humbly come to accept is that, at the end of the day, *we are incapable of bringing order to anything in a way that will make us happy*. Only God has the wisdom and power to do that. And so we must choose to turn over the ordering of all things in our lives to God if we are to find happiness; that is, the Joy and Peace we all seek. The great irony of life we must all come to understand and accept is: *It is not the masters who find Joy and Peace in this life. It is the servants.*

Luke 9:24 "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me (*Jesus*) will save it." (NIV)

This is the fundamental transformation God seeks in each of His children. He wants us to forego the mastery of our lives and willingly become servants of Him, so He

can through His all-encompassing wisdom and power order our lives in keeping with His perfect plan and use us to fulfill His great design for human history. God can use the selfless, discerning servant to accomplish His perfect will for both all humanity and each individual life, because a servant will choose to follow God's leading. A master will follow only his or her own.

Joshua 24:14,15 "... serve him with all faithfulness... But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve..." (NIV)

Romans 6:13 "... offer every part of yourself to him (*God*) as an instrument of righteousness." (NIV)

2 Timothy 2:21 "Those who cleanse themselves... will be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work." (NIV)

So what happens to the servants? Are they used and abused throughout this life, then forgotten and tossed aside to wither in the dust? Absolutely not! It's just the opposite. Servants achieve (in God's eyes) *true greatness*. Not the fleeting nonsense this world passes off as greatness, but everlasting, genuine greatness as described in God's eternal, inerrant Word.

In this fallen world, people get rich or people get famous and they are called "great." But that mighty equalizer called death strips the earthly fortunes from every man and woman, and not a penny remains to carry into eternity. Earthly fame is equally fleeting and worthless to those who pass through the door of death. Heirs (and tax collectors!) receive our wealth and time consumes our fame, until nothing remains of what made us "great" in the eyes of the fallen world.

Matthew 6:19-21 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (NIV)

1 Timothy 6:7-19 "For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it... Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs... pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith... Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life." (NIV)

Proverbs 11:7 “When a wicked man dies, his hope perishes; all he expected from his power comes to nothing.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

In eternity, when this world and everything in it is gone forever, there will be a new ordering of the great and the small. The “great” will be those servants who turned the mastery of their lives over to God and thereby accomplished His purpose. *Servanthood* is the key to greatness in this life, and (as we will see in the Coda to this study) in eternity greatness receives its due reward.

Matthew 23:11,12 “The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (NIV)

Matthew 18:1-5 “At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.’ ” (NIV)

Mark 9:33-35 “They (*Jesus and the Disciples*) came to Capernaum. When he (*Jesus*) was in the house, he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the road?’ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, ‘Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.’ ” (NIV)

Luke 22:24-27 “A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.’ ” (NIV)

Matthew 20:20-27 “Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. ‘What is it you want?’ he asked. She said, ‘Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom... When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’ ” (NIV)

In our heart-of-hearts, nearly everyone wants to be great and somehow recognized. And in order to achieve these things we step all over each other, desperately trying to claw our way to the top of the heap. This is what the fallen world teaches us to do.

But in God's eyes, true greatness and recognition do not reside at the top of the heap. They reside at the bottom, deep down in the lowest echelon of the world's caste system. Almighty God, who will one day make all things new and all things right, recognizes greatness where it truly resides, with the humble servants of His kingdom, and when God finally brings all creation before Him for eternal judgment, this greatness will be recognized and rewarded. The "heap" will be turned on its ear, and the "first will be last, and the last will be first."

Matthew 19:27-30 "Peter answered him (*Jesus*), 'We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.'" (NIV)

Matthew 10:32,33 "Whoever acknowledges me (*Jesus*) before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven." (NIV)

Matthew 6:1-4 "Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I (*Jesus*) tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." (NIV)

We have to be careful in considering the biblical ideal of servanthood. As we read through the Bible, we find stories of great, servant-minded men who rose to the highest level of authority in the land, and also those who lived out their lives in unassuming positions. Being a servant does not necessarily mean being the "low man on the totem pole." Presidents and CEOs can be great servants, and buck privates can be conniving scoundrels, and it can also be the other way around. Being a servant has to do, not with the level of authority we are granted on earth, but with the level of value we choose to place on the well-being of others and our willingness to put the welfare of others above our own. These are the qualities of a true servant that befit men and women of every station.

We should seek to be servant-minded wherever God sets us in life, and use our natural abilities and God-given passions for the benefit of one another. In our efforts to be servants of God, we should never be unappreciative of the gifts God has given us, or reluctant to excel or take up positions of leadership that rightly come to us, because we want to be "servants." Job descriptions and pay scales are not what make

us servants or masters. Christ-like thoughts, words, and deeds make us servants of the living God.

Colossians 3:23,24 “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.” (NIV)

Romans 14:13-19 “Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this – not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way... for the kingdom of God is... righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.” (NASB)

1 Peter 4:10 “As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” (NASB)

Romans 12:5-8 “so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly... he who teaches... he who exhorts... he who gives... he who leads... he who shows mercy...” (NASB)

We can choose to retain the mastery of our lives, embrace the world’s darkness, and seek greatness and recognition through the self-absorption, self-deceit, and self-indulgence that come from pride. Or we can choose to become God’s servants, seek the light, and achieve greatness and recognition through the selflessness, discernment, and service that come from humility. In the end, we attain the same thing – greatness and recognition. The difference is where they come from – the fallen world that is passing away, or the holy, loving God who endures forever.

1 John 2:17 “The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.” (NIV)

God’s ways test the human heart. Our natural pride often recoils at the thought of becoming a servant in order to know Joy and Peace. We have no natural desire to serve. Instead, we want some sort of magic pill we can take that instantaneously transforms us into men and women who suddenly know Joy “inexpressible” and Peace “surpassing comprehension.” To choose to become a servant is a lifetime commitment, a long and perhaps difficult journey towards the elusive qualities of true happiness.

Proverbs 17:3 “The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tests hearts.” (NASB)

Jeremiah 17:10 “I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds.” (NASB)

Deuteronomy 8:2-16 “Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what

was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands... He led you through the vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions... to humble and test you so that in the end it might go well with you.” (NIV)

James 1:2-4 “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (NASB)

Job 23:10 “... when he (*God*) has tested me, I will come forth as gold.” (NIV)

This realization is a “gut check” that forces us to choose between two very different paths – the path of the master or the path of the servant. Which road we elect to take unequivocally illustrates who we truly are and what we truly desire as we live out our lives in a fallen world.

1 Chronicles 28:9 “... serve Him with a whole heart and a willing mind; for the LORD searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will reject you...” (NASB)

1 Peter 2:10-17 “... you are the people of God... Live such good lives among the pagans that... they may see your good deeds and glorify God... For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men... live as servants of God...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

The first act of the Last Supper.

In Chapter 4 we looked at the “last words of the Last Supper.” Special care was taken to heed the final words of Jesus to His disciples on the night before He went to the cross. These words were an impassioned plea for the disciples (and for us) to come to know the same Joy and Peace that Jesus had experienced during His few short years on earth.

Before we move on, it is equally valuable for us to look at how Jesus *began* the Last Supper. Jesus knew this was His last evening to spend with the men He had trained for three years to carry on after He left the world. What would He say or do to set the tone for their last evening together? How would He choose to begin this extraordinary night?

Not with words, but with a simple, selfless act: He washed the disciples’ feet.

To understand the significance of this act, we must first appreciate a few things about the ancient world. The primary mode of transportation in Jesus’ day was walking. Few people had horses or donkeys to ride, and even fewer had chariots or the like. If you needed to get somewhere, you walked.

Typically, you walked on dirt roads. The Romans made great strides in building stone “highways,” some of which still remain today, but most roads were simple dirt paths. This was particularly true in Judea, where the climate was dry and the vegetation was low.

Most people walked these dusty roads in open-toed sandals. The footwear of the ancients was a simple sandal that laced across the foot and ankle, with a thin sole providing relatively little support as they made their way along uneven dirt roadways.

Together, all of this meant the feet of the ancient Judeans were ordinarily tired, dirty, and smelly. Not a pleasant picture, but an accurate one! Sandaled feet grew sore and sweaty as they plodded along, while dirt and dust caked onto the foot and ankle. By the end of the day, feet begged to be cleaned and refreshed.

That’s why “washing the feet” held a special place in the culture of the ancient world. In scrubbing dirt and mud from tired, aching feet, the traveler was not only bathed and prepared for sleep (who would want to slide filthy feet under the covers!) but he or she also received a much needed massage of the insteps, toes, and ankles that was relaxing at the end of a hard day.

It’s difficult for us to appreciate how good this must have felt. Today we walk much less on better surfaces in terrific footwear. The ancients had no such advantages. Many of our nerves run all the way to our feet, and certain Asian medical disciplines teach that by manipulating the nerves in our feet with massage the entire body can be soothed. If you’ve ever been lucky enough to have a foot massage from a masseuse trained in these arts, you would suspect they are right! The ancients certainly knew and appreciated the therapeutic qualities of a good foot rub, and so washing the feet at day’s end was a special treat that signaled it was time to unwind and relax.

But it was not the most glamorous job! And it was definitely not the master’s responsibility to wash the dirty, smelly feet of his family or guests. It was the servant’s job, ordinarily done as soon as someone entered the home in the evening so everyone was refreshed and ready to enjoy a meal and some conversation.

Now let’s try to appreciate the scene at the Last Supper. Jesus knew this was His last night with the disciples. He also knew by morning every single one of them would desert Him in His time of greatest need, and one of them would even become His betrayer. So we have God incarnate sitting down with a bunch of guys who would in a few short hours totally abandon Him, and another guy who would betray Him (with a kiss). Would He berate them, as they deserved? Would He exterminate Judas, as He deserved?

No! Jesus got down on His knees, and one by one took their dirty, smelly feet in His hands, and washed them clean and made them feel like new.

Try to let that sink in. The incarnate God of the universe washed the tired, filthy feet of a bunch of men who after three years of spending every day in His company would completely and spectacularly fail Him the next morning.

This tells us so much about who God truly is, and how He behaves towards us, and who He wants us to become, and how He wants us to behave towards one another. Jesus sets the tone for the Last Supper, which would be burned into the memory of His disciples (and recorded for all eternity in God's Word), and He provides us with perhaps the greatest example of how we are to treat one another, with one simple, selfless act.

John 13:1-17 “It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The evening meal was in progress... Jesus knew that... he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, ‘Lord, are you going to wash my feet?’ Jesus replied, ‘You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand’... When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. ‘Do you understand what I have done for you?’ he asked them. ‘You call me “Teacher” and “Lord,” and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.’ ” (NIV)

“Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” Here’s why Jesus began the Lord’s Supper the way He did. He wanted to give us a vivid portrait of what makes us great and what brings us blessing. Notice it wasn’t an act of mastery or strength. Jesus didn’t come in and pronounce judgment upon the weak-kneed disciples for their impending desertion. Nor did He put the murderous Judas in a headlock and cast him into the pits of hell. He washed their feet. All of them. From Peter, James, and John, who were perhaps His best friends, to Judas, who was perhaps His worst enemy.

The first act of the Last Supper was an act of utter submission to God and others, and Jesus calls upon us to follow His example so we can, like Him, be great and blessed. All authority in all the universe now belongs to Jesus, along with all praise, glory, and honor, and He didn’t come to these things by being His own master. He gained them by being God’s most humble, obedient servant. In the same way, we are to forego the mastery of our lives and choose to serve God, and in so doing, achieve

true greatness in the eyes of almighty God and receive the blessing of His Joy and Peace.

Philippians 2:5-11 “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (NASB)

Hebrews 12:1-14 “... let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood... Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ‘Make level paths for your feet,’ so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.” (NIV)

Deuteronomy 11:13-15 “So if you faithfully obey the commands I (*God*) am giving you today – to love the LORD your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul – then I will send rain on your land in its season, both autumn and spring rains, so that you may gather in your grain, new wine and olive oil. I will provide grass in the fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied.” (NIV)

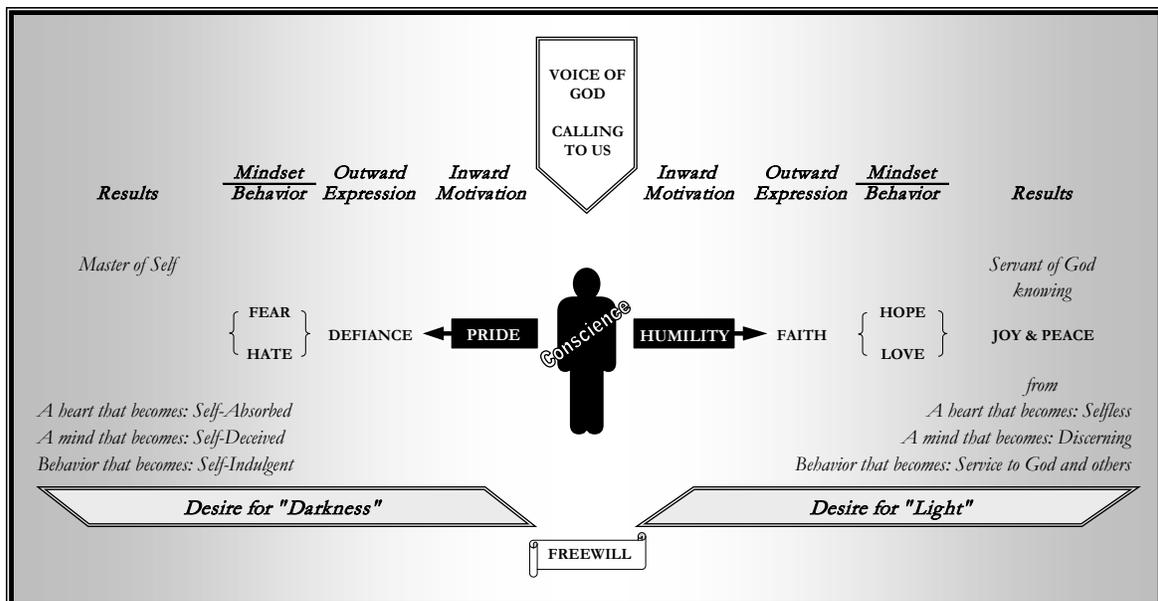
Jude 1:24,25 “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.” (NASB)

Jesus teaches us to wash *everyone's* feet. That includes our dearest friends, like Peter, James, and John, and our worst enemies, like Judas. Serving friend and foe alike brings light to the fallen world through the reflection of Jesus' nearly incomprehensible love.

Jesus also teaches us to wash everyone's feet, *even before we go to the cross*. Jesus didn't wash the disciples' feet on a good day. He wasn't having a fun, easy day that put Him in a great mood and inspired Him to do this service for His disciples. It was His darkest night. He knew He was about to suffer the greatest agony and torment in all of human history, but this knowledge didn't stop Him. Not even for a second. He did it anyway.

And perhaps the most miraculous thing of all is: He did it with Joy “inexpressible” and Peace “surpassing comprehension.” Jesus teaches us to wash everyone’s feet, even before we go to the cross, *with Joy and Peace*. Jesus wasn’t surly, bitter, or begrudging as He scrubbed the filth from the corns and calluses on twenty-four different feet. In carrying out the “first act of the Last Supper” Jesus was filled with the Joy and Peace He was about to speak of during the “last words of the Last Supper.” Jesus found the key to knowing Joy and Peace in a fallen world, and the shocking thing is that this key is not cut from mastery of the temporary distractions of a fallen world, but from service to our Heavenly Father and fellow mankind.

The transformation’s results: Joy and Peace.



At some point in our lives, our conscience “feels” the voice of God calling to us. We sense that God is and God cares, and we either humbly decide to seek God and follow Him into His light, or in our pride we decide to reject God and descend into the world’s darkness seeking its temporary distractions.

If we decide to place our trust in God, this faith in Him fills our minds with hope. We believe that a holy God is. We believe that a holy God loves us. And we believe that this holy, loving God rewards those who seek Him.

This confidence in God gives us the courage we need to face life in a fallen world. We know God has a plan for our lives that is specific, vital, and designed for our good. We know God will never leave us, nor will He ever forsake us. He will guide and direct us through good times, bad times, and everything in between, so we are able to fulfill His perfect plan. And no matter where the journey of life takes us, we

know our ultimate destiny is to spend an eternity with almighty God enjoying the blessing and reward of a divine inheritance that will never pass away.

Because we believe these things, our hearts become selfless. Our focus is on pleasing the holy God who loves us, not on our own selfish interests. Our minds also become discerning. We are filled with the truth of God's Word and the power of God's Spirit, instead of the lies and half-truths of a fallen world.

All of this imparts to us an *enthusiasm for the adventure of life*; that is: Joy. We are excited to meet each day, knowing the Creator of the universe and everything in it is guiding us towards His ultimate plan and purpose. He cares for us as a father for his child, except that He is a *perfect* father who will *always* do what is *exactly* right for us *every* time according to His *flawless* plan, even if we do not always understand exactly what He is up to. We therefore have every reason to live life with passion.

Isaiah 40:28-31 “Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” (NIV)

Proverbs 3:5,6 “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” (NIV)

Hebrews 10:22-36 “let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings... Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful... Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.” (NIV)

Habakkuk 3:17-19 “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength...” (NIV)

Psalms 33:1-22 “Sing joyfully to the LORD... For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does... the eyes of the LORD are on... those whose hope is in his unfailing love... We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. May your unfailing love be with us, LORD, even as we put our hope in you.” (NIV)

Jeremiah 15:16 “... Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart...”
(NASB)

Romans 15:13 “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”
(NIV)

We also gain a *contentment with the outcomes of life*; that is: Peace. No matter what each day brings, whether it is a tremendous victory or a spectacular defeat, we know God is working all things together for our good. Our loving Heavenly Father is always there by our side, and He is using us in both good times and bad to further His perfect will. We therefore have every reason to live life with satisfaction.

Romans 8:28 “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”
(NASB)

Proverbs 16:4-20 “The LORD works out everything to its proper end – even the wicked for a day of disaster. The LORD detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished... blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD.” (NIV)

Isaiah 26:3,4 “The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect peace, because he trusts in You. Trust in the LORD forever, for in GOD the LORD, we have an everlasting Rock.” (NASB)

John 16:33 “These things I (*Jesus*) have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.” (NASB)

Philippians 4:11-20 “I (*Paul*) have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me... And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen.” (NASB)

Proverbs 3:13-26 “Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed... My son, do not let wisdom and understanding out of your sight, preserve sound judgment and discretion; they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck. Then you will go on your way in safety, and your foot will not stumble. When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, for the LORD will be at your side and will keep your foot from being snared.” (NIV)

Isaiah 58:11 “And the LORD will continually guide you, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, and give strength to your bones; and you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.” (NASB)

Words and deeds of love then confirm and seal the Joy and Peace we gain from faithful, selfless hearts and hopeful, discerning minds. We love God and one another the way Jesus loved God and others, and this ensures that nothing we say or do causes us to lose through hateful behavior the Joy and Peace we have gained from trusting God. Love becomes the *completion* of faith and hope, and the covering that protects their legacy of Joy and Peace.

1 John 2:10 “The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him.” (NASB)

John 15:10-12 “If you keep My (*Jesus*)’ commandments, you will abide in My love... These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full. This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.” (NASB)

Colossians 3:14 “Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.” (NASB)

We begin as our own masters, with self-absorbed hearts and self-deceived minds, whose desire is only to indulge ourselves in the temporary distractions offered by the darkness of a fallen world. We become servants of God, with selfless hearts and discerning minds, whose desire is to serve God and others and bring light to a fallen world. Through this transformation, from defiance, fear, and hate to faith, hope, and love, we are brought out of the world’s darkness and into God’s light, and there we receive from God His gift of Joy “inexpressible” and Peace “surpassing comprehension.”

2 Corinthians 3:3,18 “... you are a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts... And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord...” (NIV)

Romans 12:1-18 “... offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is... Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope... as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” (NIV)

Psalms 119:105-111 “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path... Your statutes are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart.” (NIV)

1 Peter 1:8 “and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory,” (NASB)

Philippians 4:6,7 “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (NASB)

Why is Joy sometimes described as “inexpressible” and Peace as “surpassing comprehension?” Part of the answer is: They exist where (from the world’s perspective) they should not be. From the world’s perspective, we are taught we will know satisfaction and contentment when we get rich, famous, or powerful, and when we are then able to possess the things wealth, fame, and power can afford – the house, the car, the vacations, the parties, the alcohol and drugs, the sexual partners, and on and on and on. These are the things “masters” devote their lives to achieving and possessing, and where we expect to find happiness.

The truth is: *None of these things* ultimately bring us true happiness. You can sift through all the wealth, fame, and power the world had to give and you will *never* find Joy and Peace. They simply do not reside there.

Nor do they exist in other more noble places where we expect to find happiness, like marriage, children, or in accomplishing some great and worthy deed. Of course this does not mean Joy and Peace cannot be experienced in marriage, parenthood, or personal accomplishments. It just means these things are not the *source* of Joy and Peace. (If they were, every spouse, parent, and accomplished person would be happy, and we all know this is not true.) These things are wonderful vehicles through which Joy and Peace can be *expressed*, but they are not what *imparts* these elusive qualities.

Joy and Peace reside in the most unlikely place imaginable – in the heart and soul of selfless, discerning servant of the holy, loving God. This is the exact opposite of what the world would have us believe. We are taught that if we “look out for number one” and go out and conquer the world, we’ll be happy. But the opposite is true. We find true happiness only when we look out for others and serve God and our fellow man.

Another reason God’s Joy is “inexpressible” and His Peace “surpasses comprehension” is: They exist *when* (from the world’s perspective) they should not be. We just saw Joy and Peace are not *where* the world tells us to look (with the masters of fame, fortune, and power, etc.). It’s also amazing to recognize that God grants Joy and Peace during times of both great prosperity and when you would least expect it – during tremendous adversity.

The world tells us we will be happy when we know a life of ease. We want to find smooth waters and a luxury yacht to sail aboard. Then, as we sip cocktails in the stern with a supermodel, we’ll be happy.

As you read this there are multi-millionaires sitting next to goddesses and martinis on floating five star hotels drifting along glassy seas, and they are absolutely miserable. There are also humble servants of God holding on for dear life in dingy row boats caught in typhoons, who are full of Joy “inexpressible” and Peace “surpassing comprehension.”

Romans 2:9-11 “There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil... but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good... For there is no partiality with God.” (NASB)

Ecclesiastes 6:2 “God gives some people wealth, possessions and honor, so that they lack nothing their hearts desire, but God does not grant them the ability to enjoy them...” (NIV)

Ecclesiastes 5:19 “Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil – this is a gift of God... because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart.” (NIV)

Psalms 128:1,2 “How blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in His ways. When you shall eat of the fruit of your hands, you will be happy and it will be well with you.” (NASB)

Acts 5:40-42 “... They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.” (NIV)

Habakkuk 3:17-19 “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength...” (NIV)

Philippians 4:11-20 “I (*Paul*) have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me... And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 7:4 “... in all our troubles my (*Paul's*) joy knows no bounds.” (NIV)

The Joy and Peace God grants to His faithful servants exist wherever the servant is at all times. It doesn't matter what (from a worldly perspective) you achieve or possess, and it doesn't matter if times are good or bad. What matters is that your humble desire for God's light manifests itself in faith, hope, and love – the hallmarks of a selfless, discerning servant of God and others – because it is through these qualities God grants His divine Joy and Peace, regardless of where or when you find yourself in a fallen world.

Romans 14:17-19 “For the kingdom of God is... righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men. Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Perhaps the greatest reason God’s Joy is “inexpressible” and His Peace “surpasses comprehension” is this: *They simply cannot be described or comprehended by someone who has not felt them.* God’s Joy and Peace cannot be shared through descriptive words or even the highest expressions of music or art. God’s Joy and Peace must be *experienced* to be truly understood. God Himself must grant to you His Joy and Peace (resulting from a close relationship with Him that deepens through the journey of your life together as heavenly Father and earthly child) before you will ever be able to truly comprehend it, let alone attempt to describe it.

Joy and Peace, these most elusive of all human desires, are ultimately gifts granted to us by the grace of the One through whom each of us and all that is exists. They are bestowed to God’s faithful children as a natural result of growing close to God as we trust in Him and as we serve Him through emulating the love so dramatically embodied in His Son and our Savior. We walk with Him, and then become more like Him, and then work in harmony with His extraordinary design. Finally, we become a living instrument through which God brings His glorious, holy light to a fallen world shrouded in darkness.

Romans 6:11-14 “... count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus... do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires... rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. For sin shall no longer be your master...” (NIV)

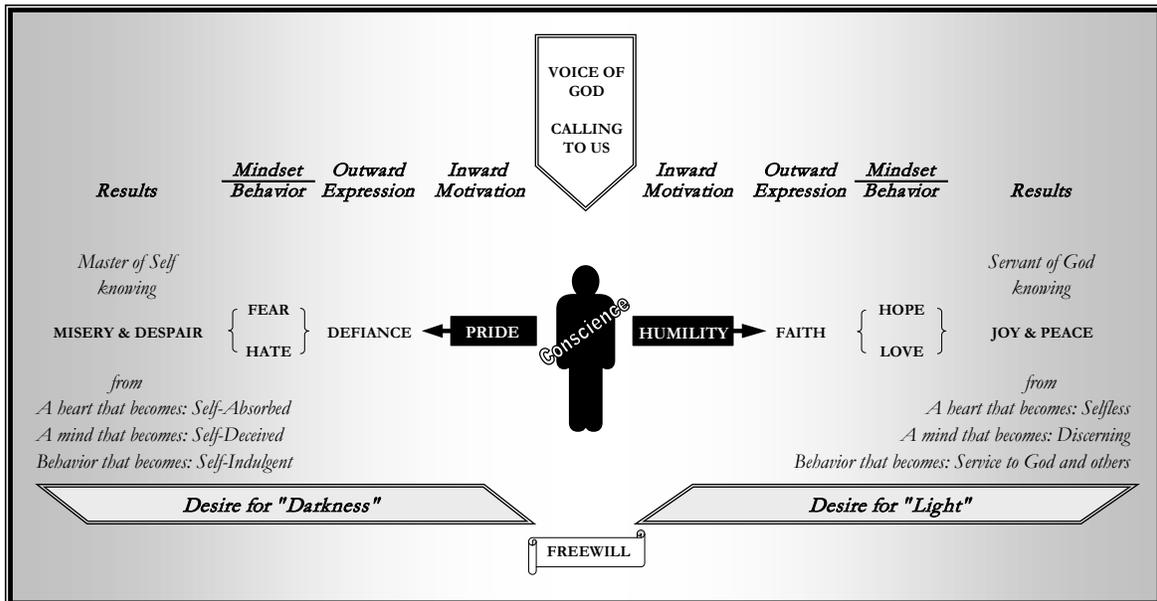
2 Timothy 2:21 “Those who cleanse themselves... will be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.” (NIV)

Ephesians 2:10 “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Then, just as Jesus knew true Joy and Peace as He navigated the often treacherous waters of life in a fallen world, we come to know true Joy and Peace. In the act of walking humbly with our God, we come into sync with the melody, harmony, and rhythm of God’s perfect design, and our hearts, minds, and souls fill up to overflowing with the music of God’s inexpressible Joy and all-surpassing Peace.

Psalms 89:15-17 “Blessed are those who have learned to... walk in the light of your presence, LORD. They rejoice in your name all day long; they celebrate your righteousness. For you are their glory and strength...” (NIV)

The alternatives: Misery and Despair.



When our conscience first “feels” the voice of God calling to us, we arrive at the first true crossroads of our lives. We sense that God is and God cares, and as we have seen, we either humbly decide to seek God and follow Him into His light, or in our pride we decide to reject God and retreat into the world’s darkness seeking its temporary distractions.

If we decide to reject God and instead place our trust in ourselves, this defiance of God eventually fills our minds with fear. Deep down inside, we know a holy God is. We know He loves us. And we even know this holy, loving God rewards those who seek Him.

But in order to seek God we must *obey* God, and obedience is something our prideful hearts will not allow us to do. So we plunge headlong into the darkness, and with each step a nagging fear begins to grow stronger and stronger, as our injured conscience reminds us that one day when the journey of life is over we will stand before the God we have defied and give an account for the decisions we have made.

John 16:8 “And He (*the Holy Spirit*), when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment;” (NASB)

Romans 1:18-32 “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as

God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man... Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions... receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness... and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.” (NASB)

Psalm 14:4 “Will evildoers never learn... There they are, overwhelmed with dread...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

This fear naturally breeds a mental state of insecurity, and insecurity has only one tool to deal with the challenges of life in a fallen world: Cowardice. We plan cowardly acts and omissions that become a two-edged sword with which we carve out our place in the darkness, and therein we seek to collect and hold on to as many of the world’s distractions as we can.

Because of these choices, our hearts become self-absorbed. Our focus is on pleasing our own selfish interests, without regard for others, let alone God. Our minds become self-deceived. We reject the truth of God’s Word and the power of God’s Spirit, and instead build a house of cards upon the lies and half-truths of a fallen world that give us excuses to do what our conscience continually reminds us is wrong.

1 Timothy 4:1,2 “... in later times some will abandon the faith... Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.” (NIV)

Titus 1:15,16 “... both their minds and consciences are corrupted. They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him...” (NIV)

1 Timothy 1:18,19 “... fight the battle well, holding on to faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and so have suffered shipwreck...” (NIV)

In the end, all of this imparts to us a *repulsion for the burden of life*; that is: Misery. When we choose to live our lives in defiance of the living God, and our fearful minds are overrun with insecurity and cowardice, life ceases to be an adventure and becomes a burden. Instead of being excited to meet each new day, we are repulsed by the prospect. The spark in our eyes becomes an emptiness. The spring in our step becomes a punishing forced march. We live out our lives with passionless loathing.

Job 20:4-8 “Surely you know how it has been from of old, ever since mankind was placed on the earth, that the mirth of the wicked is brief, the joy of the godless lasts but a moment. Though the pride of the godless person reaches to the heavens and his head touches the clouds, he will perish forever, like his own dung; those who have seen him will say, ‘Where is he?’ Like a dream he flies away, no more to be found, banished like a vision of the night.” (NIV)

Deuteronomy 28:62-67 “... because you did not obey the LORD your God... the LORD will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life. In the morning you will say, ‘If only it were evening!’ and in the evening, ‘If only it were morning!’ – because of the terror that will fill your hearts...” (NIV)

Job 18:5,11 “The lamp of the wicked man is snuffed out... Terrors startle him on every side and dog his every step.” (NIV)

We also develop a *despondency with the outcomes of life*; that is: Despair. No matter what each day brings, even if it is a great victory, it is never enough. Each and every distraction of this world is temporary and ultimately unfulfilling, and so eventually the depth of our eyes becomes painfully shallow. The firmness of our step becomes increasingly unstable. We live out our lives with perpetual discontent.

Isaiah 57:20,21 “But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. ‘There is no peace,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked.’” (NIV)

Ezekiel 12:19 “... They will eat their food in anxiety and drink their water in despair... because of the violence of all who live there.” (NIV)

Isaiah 9:18-20 “Surely wickedness burns like a fire... On the right they will devour, but still be hungry; on the left they will eat, but not be satisfied. Each will feed on the flesh of their own offspring.” (NIV)

Haggai 1:5,6 “Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.’” (NIV)

Ecclesiastes 2:1-20 “I (*Solomon, perhaps the most powerful and wealthy man to ever live*) said to myself, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.’ But that also proved to be meaningless... what does pleasure accomplish? I tried cheering myself with wine... I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards... I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well – the delights of a man’s heart... I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor... Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun. Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom... Then I said to myself... ‘What then do I gain by being wise?... This too is

meaningless.’ So I hated life... All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for... So my heart began to despair...” (NIV)

Words and deeds of hate then take the misery and despair we receive from defiant, self-absorbed hearts and fearful, self-deceived minds and burn them into our souls like a brand. When we are defiant and fearful, we end up hating God, others, and even ourselves, and through this hatred we become entombed in an inescapable misery and despair. Hate becomes the completion of defiance and fear, and the disfigurement that perpetuates their legacy of misery and despair.

Job 15:20-26 “... the wicked man suffers torment... Distress and anguish fill him with terror; troubles overwhelm him... because he shakes his fist at God and vaunts himself against the Almighty, defiantly charging against him...” (NIV)

Psalms 73:3-8 “... the wicked... pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits. They scoff, and speak with malice...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Habakkuk 2:4-17 “See, the enemy is puffed up; his desires are not upright... he is arrogant and never at rest. Because he is as greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied... You will be filled with shame instead of glory... The violence you have done... will overwhelm you, and your destruction... will terrify you.” (NIV)

Notice for every quality that comes from humbly seeking God, there is a counterpart that comes from pridefully seeking the distractions of the world; and these opposing qualities propel us towards the alternative ends of Joy and Peace, or misery and despair.

God calls out to us, and we either humbly desire His light or pridefully desire the world’s darkness. Our course is then set in one of two opposite directions, and we develop hearts that are either faithful and selfless, or defiant and self-absorbed. Our minds become either hopeful and discerning, or fearful and self-deceived. Our behavior becomes either loving and of service to God and others, or hateful and self-indulgent. And as a result of all of this, we come to know either Joy and Peace, or misery and despair.

Pride takes us on a *journey through the self* – led by the self-absorption of the defiant, through the self-deception of the fearful, to the self-indulgence of the hateful. In this pride we take up the mastery of our lives, and we lead ourselves through darkness into self-induced misery and despair.

Humility takes us on a *journey through grace* – led by the selflessness of the faithful, through the discernment of the hopeful, to the service of the loving. In this humility

we forgo the mastery of our lives, and we are led by God through light into His Joy and Peace.

What triggers these diametrically opposed journeys and determines which road we choose is our fundamental, underlying desire for either the things of God's light or the things of the world's darkness. We set our sights on one of these two beacons, and they lead us down two entirely different paths.

John 3:17-21 “For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him... This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.” (NASB)

Proverbs 5:21-23 “For the ways of a man are before the eyes of the LORD, and He watches all his paths. His own iniquities will capture the wicked, and he will be held with the cords of his sin... in the greatness of his folly he will go astray.” (NASB)

Isaiah 59:4-8 “No one calls for justice; no one pleads his case with integrity. They rely on empty arguments and speak lies; they conceive trouble and give birth to evil... Their deeds are evil deeds... Their thoughts are evil thoughts; ruin and destruction mark their ways. The way of peace they do not know; there is no justice in their paths. They have turned them into crooked roads; no one who walks in them will know peace.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Proverbs 11:6 “... the unfaithful are trapped by evil desires.” (NIV)

2 Timothy 3:2-17 “For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control... You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of... and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” (NASB)

Psalms 119:161-165 “... my heart stands in awe of Your words. I rejoice at Your word, as one who finds great spoil... Those who love Your law have great peace, and nothing causes them to stumble.” (NASB)

1 John 2:6-11 “Whoever claims to live in him (*God*) must live as Jesus did... Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness. Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble. But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.” (NIV)

Jude 1:24,25 “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God

our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.” (NASB)

A desire for light, which is essentially a desire to know and please God, ignites and then fuels a process whereby our fundamental being is transformed, from a raw piece of clay into the image of God. In serving God, we become like God, because His commandment to us as His servants is to follow the example of His Son, the ultimate servant of God and all humanity. Our selfless, faithful hearts and discerning, hopeful minds live to serve God and others with loving acts of mercy, compassion, faithfulness, patience, kindness, and forgiveness – the very behaviors that make God who He is. Then, just as God knows Joy and Peace, we know Joy and Peace.

Isaiah 64:8 “Yet you, LORD, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.” (NIV)

Ephesians 4:17-23 “So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more... put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

2 Peter 1:2-4 “Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him... He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you might become partakers of the divine nature...” (NASB)

1 Peter 1:15,16 “But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’ ” (NIV)

Ephesians 5:1,2 “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave Himself up for us...” (NASB)

1 John 3:1-24 “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!... This is how we know who the children of God are... Anyone who does not do what is right is not God’s child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister. For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another... This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth... this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. The one who keeps God’s commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.” (NIV)

1 John 4:16,17 "... God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world." (NASB)

2 Corinthians 4:2-10 "... we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ... For God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh." (NASB)

2 Corinthians 3:3,18 "... you are a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts... And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord..." (NIV)

2 Corinthians 6:16 "... For we are the temple of the living God..." (NASB)

Absent this change, we eventually become incapable of even envisioning a life where something like passion and contentment might truly exist, and so instead of pursuing the things that will create true, lasting happiness, we settle for anything that will make life just a little bit less miserable, and in desperation we turn to the temporary distractions of the world.

This desire for darkness, which is essentially a desire to hide from God and please ourselves, ignites and then fuels a process whereby our fundamental being is transformed, from a raw piece of clay into a distortion of the man or woman God created us to be. All of the abilities and passions God gave us as part of His plan for our lives grow abnormally into something they were not intended to be, because they are nurtured in darkness instead of light. We use the talents and opportunities God gives us, not to serve Him and His plan, but to defy Him and indulge ourselves. From the perverted soil of self-absorbed hearts and self-deceived minds we grow misshapen limbs that carry out acts of hateful self-indulgence. In the world's eyes we might look like a superstar, but in God's eyes we appear as a heartbreaking corruption of who we were intended to be, and the end result is eventually always the same: A man or woman lost in the darkness, full of misery and despair.

Revelation 3:17 “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.” (NIV)

Isaiah 45:9 “Woe to those who quarrel with their Maker, those who are nothing but potsherds among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, ‘What are you making?’ Does your work say, ‘The potter has no hands?’ ” (NIV)

1 John 2:15-17 “Do not love the world or anything in the world... For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

The “most excellent way.”

The apostle Paul lived in an extraordinary time, when miraculous gifts were bestowed upon the leaders of the church and others after the ascension of Jesus, in order to communicate and/or confirm the truth of the radical new message of a risen Savior. There was a fair amount of confusion about the nature of these gifts, and whether they were permanent or temporary, lasting only until such time as the new message could – by the direction and power of God’s Spirit – be reduced to a written form.

Acts 2: 1-16 “When the day of Pentecost came... All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: ‘Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism Cretans and Arabs — we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!’ Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, ‘What does this mean?’... Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “... this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:’ ” (NIV)

Acts 19:11-20 “And God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul... This became known to all, both Jews and Greeks, who lived in Ephesus; and fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified... So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing.” (NASB)

Acts 14:3 “So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of His grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders.” (NIV)

Mark 16:17-20 “These signs will accompany those who have believed... they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover... And they went out and preached

everywhere, while the Lord worked with them, and confirmed the word by the signs that followed.” (NASB)

Hebrews 2:3,4 “... After it (*God’s plan for salvation*) was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit...” (NASB)

In writing about these things to the Corinthians, Paul takes a somewhat surprising stand. He states (repeatedly) that, when it’s all said and done, all of these miraculous gifts are really nothing. They are not what truly matters. The only thing that matters at the end of the day is whether we choose to emulate the love of Jesus. Even giving away all of our possessions to the poor or giving up our very lives for another are sacrifices without gain, if we do these things without the underlying motivation of love. When we clear away the ultimately meaningless superficialities upon which we all too often get caught up, and focus on what truly matters, only three things remain: Faith, hope and love.

1 Corinthians 12:31 through **13:13** “... I (*Paul*) will show you the most excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing... where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears... And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” (NIV)

Why would he say this? How can he say this? Aren’t miracles what we dream of experiencing? Aren’t great deeds what we dream of doing? Yes and yes. But in God’s eyes, for us to speak in a language we’ve never learned by His power is not a miracle. It’s a perk He gave to certain people for a specific reason. For us to give everything we have to the poor based upon the motivations of an unclean heart is not a great deed. It’s a pose we strike in pretending to be something we are not.

In God’s eyes, the miracle is the change that takes place within us when we choose to set our desires upon the things of His light – from a defiant heart to a faithful heart, and from a fearful mind to a hopeful mind – and great deeds are the loving words and actions that spring from a transformed heart and mind.

Galatians 5:6 “... The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” (NIV)

Faith, hope, and love are the “most excellent way” – the way we have been called upon by God to live our lives if we wish to accomplish His plan and purpose, and in so doing, to know Joy and Peace. At the end of the day, it’s not whether we’ve accomplished or experienced some miraculous deed that matters. It’s whether we’ve accomplished and experienced whatever it is we are called to do in God’s plan (great or small) through a faithful heart, hopeful mind, and loving actions.

In seeking to know Joy and Peace in a fallen world, so often we want some sort of magic pill or just plain magic to get us there. We tend to think only something miraculous could bring us true happiness in this place. *But God’s Word tells us that miraculous things don’t bring Joy and Peace. Only faith, hope, and love bring Joy and Peace.* Faith, hope, and love are the “most excellent way” – the highest and best way – that truly leads us to what we truly seek: A life of meaning, impact, and significance.

Faith, hope, and love are the three essential ingredients to knowing Joy and Peace. We’ll never know Joy and Peace without them, and at the end of the day, they are the only ingredients in the recipe that matter. Love is said to be the “greatest of these” because, as we have seen, love is the culmination, completion, and protector of the other two. Faith breeds hope, and hope breeds love, and love completes and stands guard over the virtues that form it. And together these three qualities create a man or woman knowing Joy “inexpressible” and Peace “surpassing comprehension.”

Romans 15:13 “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him...” (NIV)

The portraits created by Faith, Hope, and Love.

Earlier we considered how an artist goes about creating a portrait, by first setting his or her palette with the colors that are appropriate for the painting he envisions. This is the all-important first step of a great painting. If the colors set on the palette are wrong, the picture will never be right. The painter can fulfill his vision only when the correct shades of color are present on the palette.

The corresponding lesson is: If we wish to know Joy and Peace, we must first set the palette of our characters with the qualities of faith, hope, and love. Without these colors to illustrate our lives, we will never be able to experience true happiness. Faith, hope, and love are the only qualities that can produce Joy and Peace. Nothing else has the ability to impart the life of passion and contentment we seek. Faith, hope, and love alone create Joy and Peace.

But do they create anything else? Is there any other quality or mark that faith, hope, and love burn into the subject of every portrait they illuminate? If we put every picture of every man or woman knowing Joy and Peace up on a wall side-by-side and considered them, is there anything else they would have in common?

The answer is: Yes. They would all be portraits of what the Bible describes as “strangers.”

FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE ALSO CREATE STRANGERS IN THE FALLEN WORLD.

Where do we belong?

Faith, hope, and love create Joy and Peace within us, but they also accomplish something else – they remove us from the confines of the world, so we are set free from the things that bind us to the darkness. We are lifted up and out of the world’s darkness, so we live instead in the freedom of God’s light, and this has an interesting effect: We can no longer call this world our home.

Home is a place where people *belong*, and once we are transformed by faith, hope, and love into selfless, discerning servants of the living God, there is absolutely no way we can feel a sense of *belonging* in this world. Since we no longer belong here, we become what God’s Word refers to as “strangers” here. We don’t belong in or to the world. We belong to and with God.

1 Peter 2:9-21 “But you are... a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light... Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God ... For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men... To this you were called...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Hebrews 11:13-16 “All these people were still living by faith... And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth... they were longing for a better country — a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

As a result, we will always feel a certain sense of restlessness and unfulfilled longing while living in this world. How could we not? As the children of God, this dark place is not our home. We do not belong here. We belong with God. And so in our hearts we will always long to be at home with Him during our sojourn as strangers within this fallen world.

2 Corinthians 5:1-9 “For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven... we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. Therefore we

also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him.” (NASB)

At first, this might seem to be at odds with the promise of knowing Joy and Peace in a fallen world. If we will never know a feeling of belonging here, how then can we also say we can know Peace here? The answer is: We are at Peace with God, not with the world. We know Peace because of our faith in Him, not because of our contentment with the world in which we live. The lack of fulfillment here will actually accentuate our Joy and Peace here, when through faith we eagerly anticipate the day when God will finally bring us to our eternal home and make all things new and all things right.

Romans 5:1-5 “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts...” (NIV)

Romans 8:23-32 “...we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved... And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose... What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (NIV)

Philippians 3:20,21 “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.” (NASB)

1 Thessalonians 5:5-28 “You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled... since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that... we may live together with Him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up... Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus... Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil... May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and He will do it... The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Men and women of faith, hope, and love will never “fit in” in this place. Jesus certainly did not fit in, and neither will we as His followers. And so it’s natural for God’s children to feel somewhat like outsiders. In fact, it’s good to feel like an outsider, because if you feel comfortable living in this fallen world, then something is terribly wrong.

John 15:18-21 “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me (*Jesus*) first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you... If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me.” (NIV)

John 17:1-14 “After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: ‘Father... I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world.’ ” (NIV)

If this world feels like home, then that can only be because you have embraced the things of this world. You feel comfortable with the compromise, expediency, and injustice that fuel the engines of this world, and you become adept at manipulating these things for gain. To happily call this place home is to develop a love for the distractions of the world, which God instructs us to avoid at all costs, because this is a love that leads us away from Him.

1 John 2:15-17 “Do not love the world or anything in the world... For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

In fact, we are *instructed* to live in this world as strangers. Not as natives, who put down roots, settle in, and make this place our home, but rather as travelers who know this place is just one stop along the way to our eternal home with God. God does not want us to become a part of this world. He wants us to transcend and illuminate it during our brief stay within it. He wants us to rise above the darkness of the world and hang there like a lamp, until the day He finally reaches out for us and leads us to the true home He has carefully prepared for our eternal delight.

1 Peter 1:1-17 “... To God’s elect, strangers in the world... Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power... In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all

kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy... Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Unstained by the world.

We are commanded to live as strangers. Why? So we are not stained by the world. God does not want us to take on the colors and aroma of this place. He wants us to remain pure and undefiled in His sight. And there is no way to do that if we settle down into the boiler and dye of a fallen world and make this place our home.

James 1:27 “Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” (NASB)

Philippians 2:14,15 “Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, ‘children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.’ Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky” (NIV)

Romans 12:2 “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” (NASB)

If we make this world our home, then the defiance, fear, and hate of this world will penetrate us like a stain and transform us into self-absorbed, self-deceived, and self-indulgent men and women, who learn to master the arts of cowardice and deceit that allow people to scale the heights of this fallen world. We then decorate our adopted home with all the trappings the things of Darkness can afford. We conform to the world and we are stained by it. Instead of strangers here, we become decorated citizens.

James 4:4 “... don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God?...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

But those who immerse themselves in the world ultimately receive from it only misery and despair. We reject the voice of God that calls us out from the world, and instead make our home in the world and become a part of its fabric. Then the dark trappings of our home discolor our characters and rob us of the virtues of faith, hope, and love that would bring us Joy and Peace. We are left to dwell with only their counterparts of defiance, fear, and hate, and although we have found our “home,” we live there without the happiness for which we long.

Obadiah 1:3,4 “The arrogance of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rock, in the loftiness of your dwelling place, who say in your heart, “Who will bring me down to earth?” Though you build high like the eagle, though you set your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down,’ declares the Lord.” (NASB)

Truly understanding who we truly are.

And so God tells us not to treat this world like home. We are not to settle in and lay down roots. We are to live here as strangers, ready to pick up and follow Him where ever He leads at a moment’s notice, no matter where His plan takes us, with nothing to tie us down or hold us back.

Matthew 6:19-21 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (NIV)

1 Timothy 6:7-19 “For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it... Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs... pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith... Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.” (NIV)

This insulates us from the world and allows us to rise above it. None of the filth and degradation of the world is able to cling to us, pull us down, and stain our thoughts or actions. And this has a supremely powerful effect. It allows us to truly understand who we truly are.

Ephesians 2:19 “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are... of God's household,” (NASB)

Ephesians 2:10 “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

WE ARE: GOD’S WORKMANSHIP – STRANGERS IN A FALLEN WORLD, BORN INTO A LIVING HOPE, CREATED IN CHRIST JESUS TO DO GOOD WORKS, FILLED WITH JOY INEXPRESSIBLE AND PEACE SURPASSING COMPREHENSION.

The power of identity.

Identity is something extremely powerful. Identity reveals purpose, and in turn, purpose reveals worth. When you know what something is, then you can tell what something does. And when you know what something does, then you can gauge its value. We accurately value things by properly identifying them. When we misidentify something, the results are often disastrous.

As this relates to our happiness, a sense of personal identity is something we often struggle to define. We rhetorically ask the questions: Who am I, and what is my purpose here? Without satisfying answers, we eventually become disillusioned and directionless. We never discover who we are or what we are here to do, so we wander through lethargic and apathetic lives, settling for whatever temporary distractions we can find from our unhappiness. Or we answer these questions wrongly, and we spend our lives trying to be something we are not, doing something we were not meant to do.

One of the most powerful things God’s Word does is to fully and accurately answer these foundational questions, and it does so in a way that empowers us to discover and fulfill our destiny, and in so doing, find the Joy and Peace for which we long. When we learn who we truly are, then we also discover what we are created to experience and do, and this imparts a healthy sense of self-esteem and self-worth – a value for the gift of life – that illuminates and guides us, so we settle for nothing less than those things that will lead to lasting happiness.

And so as a way to reflect upon all the things we have seen in this study and bring them to a point of closure, we will examine of our identity; that is, who we are. The answer will lead to what we are here to do, and together these things will help light the path to knowing Joy and Peace in a fallen world.

We are: God’s workmanship.

Perhaps the best place to start in considering “who we are” is to take a look at who created us. One way we place a value on something is to consider who made it. Was it Michelangelo, or Joe Shmoe? Ephesians 2:10 makes the startling declaration that we are “God’s workmanship.” Both of these words have great significance.

Ephesians 2:10 “... we are God’s workmanship...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

We are: *God's* workmanship. Not the workmanship of some unknown or untested artisan. We are made by the Creator and sustainer of the universe and everything in it, the One who thought up the sunset and the snowflake and a baby's belly laugh. It doesn't get any better than that!

Revelation 4:11 “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.” (NIV)

Isaiah 42:5,6 “This is what God the LORD says – the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: ‘I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you... a light...’ ” (NIV)

We are also: God's *workmanship*. Not His goof up or His doodle. Not His early attempts at an unmastered craft. His workmanship. We are the expert craftsmanship of the hands of the living God.

Job 10:8-12 “Your (*God's*) hands shaped me and made me... Remember that you molded me like clay... Did you not... knit me together with bones and sinews? You gave me life...” (NIV)

We saw in Chapter 6 how nothing about us in an accident. God has a specific, vital plan and purpose for our lives, and *everything* about us (including our strengths and even our weaknesses) was fashioned within us by our Creator intentionally, so we could discover and fulfill our destiny. We have been fashioned by God's supreme workmanship according to His specific intention for the journey of our lives.

Psalms 139:1-16 “You have searched me, LORD, and you know me... For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made... your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.” (NIV)

Divine Potential – Our firm foundation or greatest tragedy?

An additional dimension to this realization that we are God's workmanship is: Each of us is born with potential. Now the word “potential” can be bandied about so carelessly it loses all impact. We often talk about how everyone has potential (in human terms), and it feels like a patronizing pat on the head from an irritating uncle.

But the insight that we are *God's* workmanship reveals that each of us is born bursting with something different: *Divine Potential*. We are fashioned in our mother's womb and brought into this world at a specific instant in human history with the potential to discover and fulfill a divine plan and purpose that is specific, vital, and

overwhelmingly good. We have an important, meaningful destiny waiting to be fulfilled with eternal significance. As we saw earlier in this work, this destiny may or may not be glamorous in the eyes of the world, but in God's eyes it will always be integral to His marvelous plan and richly rewarded.

1 Corinthians 12:12-27 “For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ... For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot says, ‘Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body,’ it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear says, ‘Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body,’ it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. If they were all one member, where would the body be? But now there are many members, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’; or again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable, whereas our more presentable members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are Christ’s body, and individually members of it.” (NASB)

Jeremiah 9:23,24 “Thus says the LORD, ‘Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,’ declares the LORD.” (NASB)

Ecclesiastes 10:6 “Fools are put in many high positions...” (NIV)

James 1:9-25 “But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; and the rich man is to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away. Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him... Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow... in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves... not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does.” (NASB)

As a starting place in considering who we are, this knowledge that we are God's workmanship – crafted by the Creator with divine potential – should make a chill run down our spines. If we truly believe it, if we will have faith that God means what He says about us, then we should already feel a thrill about who we are, and we are just getting started in considering this question! When the foundation of our self-image is a belief we are the workmanship of God, we gain solid footing for a life filled with passion and contentment; that is, Joy and Peace.

Psalm 94:14-22 “For the LORD will not reject his people; he will never forsake his inheritance... When I said, ‘My foot is slipping,’ your unfailing love, LORD, supported me. When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy... the LORD has become my fortress, and my God the rock in whom I take refuge.” (NIV)

Isaiah 43:1-5 “But now, this is what the LORD says – he who created you... he who formed you... ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine... For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior... Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you... Do not be afraid, for I am with you...’ ” (NIV)

If you feel yourself rocked by some event that leaves you questioning your self-worth or value on this planet, stop and remember at the most fundamental level who you are: You are the workmanship of the God of the universe, and your potential in His plan is limited only by your willingness to trust and serve Him.

Ephesians 2:10 “For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Ephesians 1:4-14 “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace... we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will... you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance...” (NIV)

1 John 2:17 “The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.” (NIV)

We might also pause before we move on and consider something else: What greater tragedy in life is there than to miss out on your divine potential? Could there be any greater loss than the loss of God's true plan for your life? Realize God has so much in store for you, both in this life and in eternity, you cannot truly fathom it where you sit right now. Only by trusting in Him day by day, minute by minute, do you discover and fulfill this destiny. It's never too late to get back on the right path, but it's an incalculable waste to delay even for a moment. Don't end your life with the

devastating realization that your pride has caused you to suffer the greatest of all tragedies – divine potential left discarded and unfulfilled.

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 “**I** (*Solomon, perhaps the most powerful and wealthy man to ever live*) said to myself, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself.’ And behold, it too was futility... I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; I made gardens and parks for myself, and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees... I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. Also, I collected for myself silver and gold, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself... the pleasures of men – many concubines. Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem... And all that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure... I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.” (NASB)

1 Timothy 6:7-19 “For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it... Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs... pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith... Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.” (NIV)

Hebrews 12:1-13 “... let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith... strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.” (NASB)

Isaiah 57:15-18 “For this is what the high and exalted One says – he who lives forever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. I will not accuse them forever, nor will I always be angry, for then they would faint away because of me – the very people I have created... but I will heal them; I will guide them and restore comfort...’ ” (NIV)

Psalms 32:1-11 “Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered...and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will

confess my transgressions to the LORD.’ And you forgave the guilt of my sin. Therefore let all the faithful pray to you while you may be found... Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD’S unfailing love surrounds the one who trusts in him. Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!” (NIV)

Philippians 3:8 to 4:1 “... I (*Paul*) count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord... I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus... For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself. Therefore, my beloved brethren (*those Philippians Paul had won to Christ*) whom I long to see, my joy and crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord, my beloved.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 4:17,18 “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (NASB)

We are: Strangers in a fallen world.

In seeking our identity, we began by looking at who made us. We should also consider where He put us. We are the workmanship of God, who have been placed smack dab in the middle of a fallen world.

This has a dramatic effect on our identity, because the environment in which you place an object contributes to two things: Its *fit* and *purpose*. In a vacuum, it’s hard to tell what an object is designed to be and do, because there is nothing to compare and relate it to. Nothing exists against which to consider its possible use. It’s not until you place an object in a specific setting that you acquire the necessary background to allow you to evaluate what something can and should do.

But once an object is placed in an environment, you can then tell pretty quickly whether it will blend in with its surroundings or stick out like a sore thumb. This question of fit will in turn answer whether something will exist in harmony with its environment or clash with it, and from there you can deduce its purpose.

As this relates to you and me, when you place God’s workmanship in the fallen world, you can tell immediately we do not belong. Everything we are conflicts with everything this world has become. God’s workmanship will love as Jesus loved. And

the world will hate us for it, as it hated Jesus. The fit is lousy, so what does that suggest regarding purpose, and consequently, who we are?

John 15:12-27 “My (*Jesus*) command is this: Love each other as I have loved you...

You are my friends if you do what I command... I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last... If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first... you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you... If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also... I will send to you from the Father – the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father – he will testify about me. And you also must testify...” (NIV)

The easy conclusion to draw is that God places His workmanship in the ill-fitting fallen world for the purpose of providing light in the darkness. God knows full well we don't fit, and He doesn't want us to fit. To the humble but lost heart searching for meaning in this life, God wants His workmanship to leap out from the fallen world like the sun rising over a desert wasteland, so the lost can come to us and find illumination. In the love of Christ we share that so boldly conflicts with the world others can find the truth they need that will bring them to God and allow them to walk with Him. Our harsh contrast with the world is what allows us to bear fruit within it, testifying to the lost about the hope to be found in Jesus.

God relishes the conflict between His workmanship and the things of the fallen world because it acts as a clear beacon leading to Him that's impossible for the humble heart to miss. Our purpose is to stand out from the world as its strangers, because then through God's grace we can become its light. That's who we are.

Matthew 5:14-16 “You are the light of the world... Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” (NASB)

Isaiah 42:5,6 “This is what God the LORD says – the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: ‘I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you... a light...’ ” (NIV)

To appreciate beauty and brave adversity, or to disdain beauty and fear adversity?

The light we provide to the world as its strangers shines from the point of friction created by the steady conflict between God's workmanship and the fallen world. The things of God and the things of the world collide, and as they grind against one another it's the friction between them that sparks the flame of light standing out from the darkness.

For the faithful man or woman God uses as His instrument to clash with the world, this friction translates into adversity. It's never easy to be at odds with the things of the world, and many times it involves great suffering. It's one of the ironies of life that so much of its spiritual light comes from a place where faithful people are hurting.

Matthew 5:5-45 “Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth... Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you... You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven... whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also... love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven...” (NASB)

Philippians 2:14-16 “Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life...” (NASB)

1 Peter 2:10-17 “... you are the people of God... Live such good lives among the pagans that... they may see your good deeds and glorify God... Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men... For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

2 Corinthians 4:4-10 “... the god of this world (*Satan*) has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God... For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.” (NASB)

In Chapter 6 we considered several things about human suffering and the nature of evil. Suffering is inevitable in a world where God's creation has the freedom to choose between good and evil. The only way to remove evil and suffering from the world is to remove freewill from the world, which God will not do. So instead of trying to remove these things from the world, God uses suffering as both a means to test His children (so we can thereby grow) and as a means to serve Him (through the light that comes from the faithfulness of a child of God in pain).

Faithfulness during suffering also has other powerful effects that directly relate to knowing Joy and Peace in a fallen world. It teaches us two mighty things: To *appreciate beauty*, and to *brave adversity*.

One of the great weaknesses of human nature is that we often do not appreciate the many good things we enjoy every day in this life until they are torn from us. It might be health, family, friendship, a stable income, a roof over our heads, or food in our stomachs. It also might be even more elemental things like fresh air, sunshine, the sunrise and sunset, or the stars that shine at night above our downcast heads. All of these things are easily taken for granted until some form of adversity reaches out and steals them away.

When adversity strikes, if we defy God and shake our fists at Him, the loss of these things can destroy us. But if instead we trust Him during times of adversity, we develop a keen sensitivity to and a true appreciation for the good things that survive the assault of a fallen world; that is, the beauty that exists in this world despite the rage and despair caused by men and women who choose to do evil.

For many, an appreciation for the true beauty in the world only comes when adversity strikes and rips it from us. But through this experience there is a much needed reordering of priorities that removes fundamental misconceptions about life and clears the way towards a new path full of meaning and purpose. Our eyes are opened and suddenly all that seemed important shows its true, empty face, and for the first time we are able to identify what is genuinely priceless. We become sensitive to what is actually of value in this life, and what is ultimately worthless.

Matthew 7:13,14 “... wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” (NIV)

Hebrews 10:22-36 “let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings... Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful... Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.” (NIV)

1 John 2:15-17 “Do not love the world or anything in the world... For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

1 Timothy 6:7-21 “For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs... Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life... Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have departed from the faith.” (NIV)

The “beauty” adversity teaches a humble heart to appreciate includes many things. The love of a spouse or child. The home (however humble) the family gathers within. The bread (however meager) they break together. The clothes on their backs. The health they enjoy. The time granted them to be together. Christ-centered friendships. The glory of nature we all too often pass by without a second glance. The works of artists that capture all these things through words, song, canvas, and stone.

Psalm 27:4 “One thing I have asked... that I may... behold the beauty of the LORD...” (NASB)

Proverbs 15:16,17 “Better is a little with the fear of the LORD than great treasure and turmoil with it. Better is a dish of vegetables where love is than a fattened ox served with hatred.” (NASB)

Psalm 37:16-18 “Better the little that the righteous have than the wealth of many wicked; for the power of the wicked will be broken, but the LORD upholds the righteous. The blameless spend their days under the LORD’s care, and their inheritance will endure forever.” (NIV)

This “beauty” resides ultimately in our understanding of and relationship with the God who created these things. As we begin to understand Him, and trust Him, and develop a relationship with Him over time where He sees us through cycles of both prosperity and adversity, all of these things come together in a way that opens our eyes so we can truly see. To paraphrase an old hymn, “the things of this world grow strangely dim,” and what is left is a vision of what is beautiful and of enduring worth.

Psalm 119:18-169 “Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things... I am a stranger on earth... My soul is consumed with longing...strengthen me according to your word... be gracious to me and teach me... Turn my eyes away from worthless things... Teach me knowledge and good judgment, for I trust your commands... may your unfailing love be my comfort... Your word is a lamp

for my feet, a light on my path... the unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple... I call with all my heart; answer me, LORD... May my cry come before you, LORD; give me understanding according to your word.” (NIV)

Ephesians 1:18,19 “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe...” (NIV)

As we learn to value these things, we derive Joy from them. We appreciate them for the priceless things they are, while the other worldly things that seemed so important before adversity struck fade into nothingness. And in focusing on the things that are truly beautiful in this world, we are directed down the path of life God would choose for us, and in this way God is able to grant us Peace.

Psalms 19:8-11 “The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes... They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb. By them your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward.” (NIV)

Philippians 4:6-9 “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things... practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.” (NASB)

John 16:33 “These things I (*Jesus*) have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.” (NASB)

Faithfulness during adversity teaches us to appreciate what is truly beautiful in this life. And even if we are not experiencing some or all of it, we appreciate that it exists in the world. Most importantly we appreciate whom it comes from. The appreciation of these things in and of itself becomes a source of Joy and Peace in a fallen world.

Habakkuk 3:17-19 “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength...” (NIV)

Faithfulness during adversity also teaches us something else that is extremely rare and tremendously valuable: Not to fear. When we have passed through suffering with a

faithful heart led by God (instead of trying to scratch out a path around suffering on our own), adversity loses its power over us. We no longer fear adversity in this life, because we know whatever this world throws at us, God will be there by our side. Our holy, loving Heavenly Father will walk with us step by step directly through the heart of adversity, and we will eventually come out on the other side having learned and experienced and accomplished something meaningful in the plan and purpose of almighty God. That is not something to fear, but rather something for which to be exceedingly grateful.

Psalm 23:1-4 “The LORD is my shepherd... Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me.” (NASB)

Psalm 112:4-8 “Even in darkness light dawns for the upright, for those who are gracious and compassionate and righteous... Surely the righteous will never be shaken... They will have no fear of bad news; their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the LORD. Their hearts are secure, they will have no fear...” (NIV)

Psalm 89:15-17 “Blessed are those who have learned to... walk in the light of your presence, LORD. They rejoice in your name all day long; they celebrate your righteousness. For you are their glory and strength...” (NIV)

Romans 8:15 “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba (*Aramaic for “Daddy”*), Father.’ ” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Isaiah 41:10-14 “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand... For I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, do not fear; I will help you. Do not be afraid...” (NIV)

Joshua 1:9 “... Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.” (NIV)

Psalm 3:3-6 “But you, LORD, are a shield around me... I will not fear though tens of thousands assail me on every side.” (NIV)

Psalm 62:1-12 “My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken... Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him... My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge... One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong, and that you, O Lord, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Matthew 5:11,12 “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me (*Jesus*). Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (NASB)

Acts 5:40-42 “... They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.” (NASB)

Proverbs 3:13-26 “Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold... all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed... they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck. Then you will go on your way in safety, and your foot will not stumble. When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, for the LORD will be at your side and will keep your foot from being snared.” (NIV)

Psalms 119:165 “Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.” (NIV)

In many ways, fear is the great bane of this fallen world. So much of the evil that plagues the world spreads from the extraordinarily communicable germ that is fear. We feel the voice of God calling out to us, and defy it, choosing to pursue the things of darkness. The inevitable result is the fear we looked at earlier in this chapter, which seeps up from our defiant hearts and penetrates our minds like a disease spreading through the capillaries of our souls. In time fear metastasizes to our every thought, word, and deed, and transforms our behavior into acts of self-indulgence and hate.

To those others in the world who choose to defy the call of God, fear spreads faster than any virus. The fear in others ignites the fears in us with an exponential momentum, until all are thinking, speaking, acting, and reacting from a mindset rooted in fear. And this accounts for everything from the tiny injustices to the unthinkable atrocities that violate our world. All are born from the insecure and cowardly womb of fear.

Genesis 3:9,10 “But the LORD God called to the man (*Adam*), ‘Where are you?’ He answered, ‘I... was afraid... so I hid.’” (NIV)

1 Samuel 15:24 “Then Saul said to Samuel, ‘I have sinned. I violated the LORD’s command and your instructions. I was afraid of the men and so I gave in to them.’” (NIV)

Psalms 31:13-18 “For I (*David*) hear many whispering, ‘Terror on every side!’ They conspire against me and plot to take my life... Let their lying lips be silenced, for with pride and contempt they speak arrogantly against the righteous.” (NIV)

Deuteronomy 1:26-30 “... you (*the Exodus generation of Israelites*) rebelled against the command of the LORD your God. You grumbled in your tents and said, ‘... Our brothers have made our hearts melt in fear...’ Then I (*God*) said to you, ‘Do not be terrified; do not be afraid... The LORD your God, who is going before you, will fight for you...’” (NIV)

If we are full of defiance, fear, and hate, how can we expect to appreciate the beauty that endures in the world? We lack the faculties of faith, hope, and love, which make us sensitive to what is truly beautiful. So instead of developing an appreciation for

beauty, we develop a disdain for it. We question its existence just as we question God's existence, and treat with ridicule those who embrace the beauty in the world. We deny it as we do God, for isn't the beauty in the world a pressing reminder of the One who created it?

Job 15:20-26 "... the wicked man suffers torment... Distress and anguish fill him with terror; troubles overwhelm him... because he shakes his fist at God and vaunts himself against the Almighty, defiantly charging against him..." (NIV)

Proverbs 19:3 "A person's own folly leads to their ruin, yet their heart rages against the LORD." (NIV)

Hebrews 10:26-31 "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment... For we know him who said, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' and again, 'The Lord will judge his people.' It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." (NIV)

Job 27:8 "For what is the hope of the godless when he is cut off, when God requires his life?" (NASB)

Job 18:5,11 "The lamp of the wicked man is snuffed out... Terrors startle him on every side and dog his every step." (NIV)

Psalms 19:1-6 "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their utterances to the end of the world. In them He has placed a tent for the sun... and there is nothing hidden from its heat." (NASB)

Psalms 97:6 "The heavens declare His righteousness, and all the peoples have seen His glory." (NASB)

And the thought of adversity is a terror to us. Just as we have no capacity to appreciate beauty, we have no capacity to deal with adversity, so we fear it like a rabid dog. We see no good that can come from it, and we have no one to rely upon who can truly help us see it through, so we give it wide berth and run like crazy when it sets its red eye upon us.

Deuteronomy 28:62-67 "... because you did not obey the LORD your God... the LORD will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life. In the morning you will say, 'If only it were evening!' and in the evening, 'If only it were morning!' – because of the terror that will fill your hearts..." (NIV)

Ezekiel 12:19 "... They will eat their food in anxiety and drink their water in despair... because of the violence of all who live there." (NIV)

Proverbs 24:16 "for though the righteous fall seven times, they rise again, but the wicked stumble when calamity strikes." (NIV)

Without an appreciation for the beauty in the world, but instead burdened with a fear of the world's inevitable adversity, we can never expect to know Joy and Peace. We are doomed to eventual misery and despair. Yet the cleansing power of faith, hope, and love wipes clean the residue of defiance, fear, and hate, and leaves us with a soul that has the capacity to be deeply moved by the beauty in the world, and derive true Joy and Peace from it. Then the fearlessness of our faith preserves this Joy and Peace amidst the relentless attack of adversity. And as God sees us through whatever trials we must undergo in His plan, our hearts and minds take on curiously opposite textures.

Tender hearts and strong minds, or hard hearts and weak minds?

The Bible talks a lot about the "heart" and the "mind," and obviously it's not referring to the literal heart or to the brain. It's referring to two interconnected parts of our souls. The heart is the part of us that feels. The mind is the part of us that thinks. The heart emotes. The mind reasons. They are very different, but also deeply interconnected. What affects one affects the other. And it's in our hearts and minds that we experience Joy and Peace or misery and despair.

Psalm 19:8 "The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart..." (NIV)

Colossians 3:15 "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts..." (NIV)

Romans 8:6 "... the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace," (NASB)

How do the heart and mind affect one another, and how does this relate to Joy and Peace? We think through things and make decisions with our minds. We get feedback on how these decisions affect us from our hearts. If we are making good decisions that are in line with God's plan and purpose for our lives, God's Spirit grants our hearts Peace, and this heartfelt Peace in turn steadies and empowers the mind. There exists a flow of Peace circulating between the heart and mind of a man or woman in harmony with God that creates the foundation for a healthy, growing spirit, and this also becomes the foundation upon which we can know and express Joy. The security and contentment of Peace are the springboards for the enthusiasm and passion of Joy.

Philippians 4:6,7 "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (NASB)

Isaiah 60:1-9 "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you... Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy... to the honor of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor." (NIV)

Psalm 112:1-8 "... Blessed are those who fear the LORD... Even in darkness light dawns... They will have no fear of bad news; their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the Lord. Their hearts are secure, they will have no fear..." (NIV)

Proverbs 14:30 “A heart at peace gives life to the body...” (NIV)

God’s Spirit will also impart a growing sense of unrest in the heart of someone who is making bad decisions. This circulates to the mind and causes it to become unsteady and disempowered. With an ever increasing sense of disquiet ballooning in the connection between our hearts and minds, there is no foundation upon which to experience Joy, only despair.

Psalm 36:1 “Transgression speaks to the ungodly within his heart...” (NASB)

Deuteronomy 28:62-67 “... because you did not obey the LORD your God... the LORD will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life. In the morning you will say, ‘If only it were evening!’ and in the evening, ‘If only it were morning!’ – because of the terror that will fill your hearts...” (NIV)

As we saw in Chapter 6, this is one of the ways God provides us with direction in this life. Joy and Peace well up in the hearts and minds of those who make good decisions, while misery and despair grow in the hearts and minds of those who make bad decisions. In this way, God makes His will clearly known to us.

Romans 2:9-11 “There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil... but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good... For there is no partiality with God.” (NASB)

But *knowing* God’s will and *doing* God’s will are two very different things. The Peace (or lack thereof) in our hearts and minds will provide *guidance* at the fork in the road, but it won’t *force* us down the path of God’s choosing. The Peace of God is a trustworthy counselor, but not a slave master. As we have seen, in the end we walk the paths we freely choose to take, based upon our desire for either the light of God or the darkness of the world.

Joshua 24:15 “... choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...” (NIV)

Isaiah 59:4-8 “No one calls for justice; no one pleads his case with integrity. They rely on empty arguments and speak lies; they conceive trouble and give birth to evil... Their deeds are evil deeds... Their thoughts are evil thoughts; ruin and destruction mark their ways. The way of peace they do not know; there is no justice in their paths. They have turned them into crooked roads; no one who walks in them will know peace.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Acts 26:18 “... turn... from darkness to light, and... receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me (*Jesus*).” (NIV)

John 3:17-21 “For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him... This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he

who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.” (NASB)

Romans 13:12-14 “... let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

And as our feet march down the path we desire, something happens to our hearts and minds that has an enormous impact on our ability to know Joy and Peace. The very nature of our hearts and minds are conformed so they become endowed with divergent qualities that will either welcome and receive Joy and Peace, or neglect and resist them entirely. Our hearts and minds take on opposite textures that either complement Joy and Peace like a hand in glove, or repel Joy and Peace like a kick in the stomach.

God’s voice calls out to all of us, and if we are humble and choose to heed His voice and follow it to where it leads, the faith, hope, and love that develop within us create *strong minds* and *tender hearts*. Our understanding of God’s Word and our decisions to place our faith in Him empower our minds with a hope that expresses itself through love. We begin to think, speak, and act as true children of the living God.

1 Peter 1:13-22 “Therefore, prepare you minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.”... Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

The result is a mind that is strong and (in a good sense) tough. It can’t be deceived. It can’t be compromised. And it can’t be worn down. It becomes sturdy and enduring, like a well-trained and disciplined watchman that stands guard over something precious.

Romans 12:2 “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” (NASB)

Philippians 1:9,10 “And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,” (NIV)

Proverbs 2:3-11 “indeed, if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will... find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding... Then you will understand what

is right and just and fair – every good path... Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you.” (NIV)

Lamentations 3:21 “This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope.” (NASB)

Isaiah 26:3 “The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect peace, because he trusts in You.” (NASB)

That something precious is your heart, which through this same process has taken on the *opposite* quality – a softness and tenderness that allows it to actually feel something. Your faith, hope, and love have made your heart soft and subtle, so it’s sensitive to the gentle whisper God so often employs in speaking to His children. You can hear God, because your heart is tuned to Him like a delicate instrument.

Ephesians 4:32 “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” (NASB)

2 Chronicles 34:27 “Because your heart was tender and you humbled yourself before God when you heard His words... and because you humbled yourself before Me... I truly have heard you,” declares the LORD.” (NASB)

And because your heart is sensitive, it can fully experience and take pleasure in the Joy and Peace God pours into it. It’s prepared to receive these gifts and enjoy them, even the “inexpressible” Joy and Peace “surpassing comprehension” we’ve been learning about. The heart is particularly suited for this because it feels rather than reasons. Joy and Peace will circulate from the heart to the mind and back again, and while the mind certainly benefits from this, it is within the deep recesses of a tender heart that the inexpressible is somehow comprehended.

Psalms 119:161-165 “... my heart stands in awe of Your words. I rejoice at Your word, as one who finds great spoil... Those who love Your law have great peace, and nothing causes them to stumble.” (NASB)

Psalms 33:1-22 “Sing joyfully to the LORD... For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does... the eyes of the LORD are on... those whose hope is in his unfailing love... We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. May your unfailing love be with us, LORD, even as we put our hope in you.” (NIV)

Psalms 27:1-3 “The LORD is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid?... Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then will I be confident.” (NIV)

Notice the mind is tough and the heart is soft, not the other way around. When we pridefully choose to reject the voice of God calling out to us, the defiance, fear, and hate that develop within us create *weak minds* and *hard hearts*. Our ignorance of God’s Word and our decisions to defy Him cripple our minds with a fear that expresses itself in hate. We begin to think, speak, and act as true children of the fallen world.

Hebrews 4:7 “... just as has been said before, ‘TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS.’” (NASB)

Romans 1:18-32 “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools... Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised. Amen. Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts... Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.” (NIV)

Ephesians 4:18,19 “They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Psalms 73:3-8 “... the wicked... pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits. They scoff, and speak with malice...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

The result is a mind that is weak and soft. From the world’s perspective, the intellect might be that of a genius, wielded like a heavy mace by a powerful will (or ego). But from a spiritual perspective, it’s a limp noodle. It’s easily and wholly deceived, utterly compromised, and without any real muscle to stand up to the lies and snares of a fallen world. It can’t do what a healthy mind should do, which is stand guard over a vulnerable heart.

2 Corinthians 4:4 “... the god of this world (*Satan*) has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ...” (NASB)

Romans 16:17,18 “... watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from

them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.” (NIV)

So instead of being protected by a robust mind, the heart gets pummeled at every turn by the storms and grit of the fallen world. It has no defense to the injustices and injuries thrown at it, so it becomes weathered like an old tree root. It’s hard and coarse, with all the sensitivity of a piece of old shoe leather. How is that supposed to pick out God’s voice from the world’s clamor, or know true happiness? The heart hardened by defiance, fear, and hate cannot perceive God’s voice or experience His Joy and Peace, because it cannot be penetrated and influenced by these things. It can only repel them.

Hebrews 3:12,13 “See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” (NIV)

Matthew 13:10-16 “The disciples came to him (*Jesus*) and asked, ‘Why do you speak to the people in parables?’ He replied... ‘This is why I speak to them in parables: “Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.” In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.” For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them. But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.’ ” (NIV)

Proverbs 4:23 “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.” (NASB)

Beauty and Sadness – Whetting the soul’s edge.

We’ve seen how the Bible uses “light” and “darkness” to describe the two great opposing forces that battle throughout human history. Light represents the things of God, and darkness represents the things of the world. The beauty we’ve been looking at is a part of God’s light. Whether it’s the beauty of nature, the beauty of artistic creation, the beauty of loving relationships, or the fundamental beauty of just being alive and drawing breath, these things are ultimately gifts from God that remind us God is and God cares. And in doing so they draw us towards the open arms of a loving Creator.

John 12:46 “I (*Jesus*) have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness.” (NIV)

1 Peter 2:9 “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” (NIV)

Part of the world's darkness is the sadness within it. In a sense, this sadness comes from the destruction of the beauty God brings into the world. Darkness rises up against the light, and destruction ensues. Nature is destroyed. Art is destroyed. Relationships are destroyed. Innocence is destroyed. Our very lives are destroyed. And from all this destruction a sadness bleeds that flows across the fallen world and settles around all those who inhabit it. If we let it, this sadness will trap us like quicksand and draw us ever downward into the dark.

Romans 8:20-22 “... creation was subjected to frustration... in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay... the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.” (NIV)

Isaiah 59:4-8 “No one calls for justice; no one pleads his case with integrity. They rely on empty arguments and speak lies; they conceive trouble and give birth to evil... Their deeds are evil deeds... Their thoughts are evil thoughts; ruin and destruction mark their ways. The way of peace they do not know; there is no justice in their paths. They have turned them into crooked roads; no one who walks in them will know peace.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Matthew 7:13,14 “... wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” (NIV)

Each day we walk our path with both the beauty and the sadness of the world pulling at us, drawing us towards opposite ends. Within this tug of war, the condition of our hearts and minds is vital. If our hearts are tender, the beauty of the world will bring us great Joy and Peace; and if our minds are strong, the sadness of the world will not overwhelm our hearts with a sense of hopelessness and despair.

Psalm 27:1-14 “The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?... false witnesses have risen against me... I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage...” (NASB)

1 Thessalonians 4:13 “Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to... grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.” (NIV)

Instead, something remarkable happens. The sadness of the world will inspire us to do something to bring about change. Rather than trapping us in a sinking mire, the sadness of the world will motivate us to share Christ, to speak the truth in love, to do the type of good works that as God's workmanship we are designed to do. Our tender hearts will still feel the sadness of the world deeply, but instead of being overwhelmed by it, we are roused by it. Because our minds have been strengthened by faith, we have a hope, and we want to share it. Instead of drawing us into the darkness, the sadness of the world repels us from and out of it, so we stand apart as its “strangers” who bear the light.

2 Corinthians 4:1-16 "... we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God... For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body... Therefore we do not lose heart..." (NIV)

1 Peter 2:9-12 "... you are... a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light... I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong they may see your good deeds and glorify God..." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Philippians 2:15 "... become blameless and pure, 'children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.' Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky" (NIV)

Micah 7:7,8 "But as for me, I will watch expectantly for the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me. Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy. Though I fall I will rise; though I dwell in darkness, the LORD is a light for me." (NASB)

How different if our minds are weak and our hearts are hardened! There is no capacity to appreciate the beauty in the world. It doesn't even register. And the sadness of the world runs us over like a freight train. The weak and fragile mind cannot defend the heart, and the heart, no matter how hard and brittle, after being immersed in the sadness of the world eventually becomes saturated by it. And then all that is left is disappointment, disillusion, and despair. Even the distractions of the world we have looked at in this study cannot forever divert the lost person's attention from the steadily rising pool of sadness at his or her feet, and without the lifeline of God's grace each person eventually drowns.

Isaiah 57:20,21 "But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. 'There is no peace,' says my God, 'for the wicked.'" (NIV)

Ecclesiastes 2:1-20 "I (*Solomon, perhaps the most powerful and wealthy man to ever live*) said to myself, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.'

But that also proved to be meaningless... what does pleasure accomplish? I tried cheering myself with wine... I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards... I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well – the delights of a man’s heart... I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor... Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun. Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom... Then I said to myself... ‘What then do I gain by being wise?... This too is meaningless.’ So I hated life... All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for... So my heart began to despair...” (NIV)

Deuteronomy 28:62-67 “... because you did not obey the LORD your God... the LORD will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life. In the morning you will say, ‘If only it were evening!’ and in the evening, ‘If only it were morning!’ – because of the terror that will fill your hearts...” (NIV)

Habakkuk 2:4-17 “See, the enemy is puffed up; his desires are not upright... he is arrogant and never at rest. Because he is as greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied... You will be filled with shame instead of glory... The violence you have done... will overwhelm you, and your destruction... will terrify you.” (NIV)

And so the beauty and sadness of the world affect us greatly. Both rub up against us like a whetting stone, and they can either sharpen our souls to a razor’s edge, or grind them into nothingness, all depending upon the quality of our steel; that is, the inherent strength of our character that comes from the choices we make to either accept or reject the grace of God.

We sometimes hear people talking about a person’s “steel,” meaning the quality of their character. Our steel is determined by our response to the voice of God that calls out to us. If we choose to receive God’s grace and grow in faith, hope, and love, then as we mature our steel is purified and becomes strong, and we develop the tools we need to appropriately respond to the beauty and sadness in the world.

These tools are the selfless heart, discerning mind, and acts of service to God and others we looked at earlier in this work. Together, these allow the beauty and sadness in the world to become a source of *motivation* and *resolve*. We appreciate true beauty. We do not fear adversity. And our desire is to do something to alleviate the sadness in the world as the servants of God. This intensifies the motivation of our tender, faith-filled hearts and strengthens the resolve of our strong, hope-filled minds. Because the quality of our steel is strong, the abrasion of beauty and sadness sharpens

our soul's edge and aids in creating precision instruments that can be effective in the hands of God.

Romans 6:11-14 "... count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus... do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires... rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. For sin shall no longer be your master..." (NIV)

2 Timothy 2:15-21 "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth... Those who cleanse themselves... will be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work." (NIV)

Psalm 28:7 "The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in Him, and I am helped; therefore my heart exults, and with my song I shall thank Him." (NASB)

If we choose to reject God's grace and retreat into defiance, fear, and hate, then our steel is never purified, and like an unrefined ore it remains crude and brittle, unprepared to appropriately respond to the beauty and sadness of the world. Our hearts become self-centered, our minds become self-deceived, and our actions become self-indulgent. Then beauty and sadness become a source of *discouragement* and *uncertainty*. We lack the capacity to appreciate true beauty, and eventually we develop a disdain for it, while the sadness in the world terrifies us. Hard, defiant hearts become increasingly discouraged; and weak, fearful minds become increasingly uncertain. We don't know what to do, and we lack the inspiration to seek understanding. And so our souls become dull and eventually lose sensitivity to God's beauty, while the world's sadness in time grinds what's left of us to dust.

Exodus 6:2-9 "God also said to Moses... 'say to the Israelites: "I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you... I will redeem you... I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God..." ' Moses reported this to the Israelites, but they did not listen to him because of their discouragement..." (NIV)

Exodus 32:9 " 'I have seen these people,' the LORD said to Moses, 'and they are a stiff-necked people.' " (NIV)

Jeremiah 7:24-28 "But they did not listen to me (*God*) or pay attention. They were stiff-necked and did more evil than their ancestors... they will not listen... when you call to them, they will not answer... Truth has perished; it has vanished from their lips." (NIV)

Revelation 3:17 "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked." (NIV)

Jeremiah 8:5-17 "Why then have these people turned away?... They cling to deceit; they refuse to return. I have listened attentively, but they do not say what is right. None of them repent of their wickedness, saying, 'What have I done?'

Each pursues their own course like a horse charging into battle... Since they have rejected the word of the LORD, what kind of wisdom do they have?... They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace. Are they ashamed of their detestable conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush. So they will fall among the fallen; they will be brought down when they are punished, says the LORD... 'See, I will send venomous snakes among you, vipers that cannot be charmed, and they will bite you,' declares the LORD." (NIV)

Ephesians 4:18,19 "They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

1 John 2:11 "But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them." (NIV)

Our vision of life – Balanced or skewed?

If we are to know Joy and Peace in a fallen world, it's imperative for us to learn to respond appropriately to the beauty and sadness in the world, so they become a source of motivation and resolve in our lives and not a source of discouragement and uncertainty. If we are not careful, both beauty and sadness can skew our vision of the life that has been granted to us. The key is keeping beauty and sadness in proper balance.

Ecclesiastes 7:18 "... Whoever fears God will avoid all extremes." (NIV)

If we are exposed to just beauty and experience a life of great ease, all too often we become insulated from the sadness in the world and indifferent to it. We turn into a Pollyanna, either intentionally or unintentionally callous to those who are truly suffering. We might pay lip service to the sadness in the world, but we never lift a finger to do anything about it, because in our beauty-filled life of comfort we become lazy, spoiled, and spectacularly uninformed. An imbalance favoring beauty, the good things in life, tends to make people drift towards ignorance and indolence. That's human nature.

1 Timothy 6:17-19 "Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed." (NASB)

Proverbs 31:8,9 “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.” (NIV)

Hosea 4:6,7 “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you... Since you have forgotten the law of your God... The more they multiplied, the more they sinned against Me; I will change their glory into shame.” (NASB)

Luke 8:14 “The seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity.” (NASB)

Deuteronomy 8:6-18 “Observe the commands of the LORD your God, walking in obedience to him and revering him. For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land – a land with brooks, streams, and deep springs gushing out into the valleys and hills; a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills. When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. He led you through the vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. He gave you manna to eat in the wilderness, something your ancestors had never known, to humble and test you so that in the end it might go well with you. You may say to yourself, ‘My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.’ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today. If you ever forget the LORD your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed. Like the nations the LORD destroyed before you, so you will be destroyed for not obeying the LORD your God.” (NIV)

The flip side of this would be those exposed to just the sadness in the world who experience a life of great hardship. Here we become insulated from what is truly worthy in life, and sometimes unreceptive to the very concept of its possibility of existence. Instead of a Pollyanna, we grow to be angry and bitter, striking out at just about anything that crosses our path. We’ve known only sadness, so we become aggressive, hate-filled, and narrow minded. An imbalance of sadness, the bad things in life, tends to make people drift towards hostility and extremism. That’s also human nature.

Psalm 73:1-24 “Surely God is good... to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped... For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked... When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.” (NIV)

Hebrews 12:14,15 “Pursue peace with all men... See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled;” (NASB)

Ephesians 4:29-32 “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up... Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (NIV)

Romans 2:8 “But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.” (NIV)

Ezekiel 12:19 “... They will eat their food in anxiety and drink their water in despair... because of the violence of all who live there.” (NIV)

Both a sheltered and a traumatic upbringing can skew our vision of life. We can see it as a place of all beauty, with no real sympathy for those less fortunate than ourselves; or we can see it as a place of all sadness, with no real hope for a better way. We can skip along with unrealistic expectations that life should be all sunshine and pleasure (until the inevitable strife in this world catches up and knocks us for a loop we are totally unprepared for); or we can brood along with equally unrealistic expectations that life will be all storm clouds and wretchedness (never open to the good that can come our way if we will let it through God’s grace).

Both beauty and sadness exist in abundant quantities in the fallen world, and we cannot let a misunderstanding of either one of them crush us. We have to learn to balance the two on a fulcrum of truth that allows their true nature to inspire us to become the men and women God created us to be. Then, instead of distorting our vision of life in a fallen world, our individual life experiences with beauty and sadness become an even platform upon which we gain wisdom that we can then share with others who may be lost or hurting. From our personal encounters with beauty and sadness we gain unique insight, and this insight will be perfectly suited to aid us in accomplishing God’s specific, vital plan for our lives.

2 Corinthians 1:3-5 “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.” (NIV)

1 Peter 1:6,7 “... for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith – of greater

- worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may result in praise, glory and honor...” (NIV)
- 1 Peter 5:8-10** “Be self-controlled and alert... standing firm in the faith... And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)
- Romans 8:28** “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” (NASB)
- Proverbs 16:4-20** “The LORD works out everything to its proper end – even the wicked for a day of disaster. The LORD detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished... blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD.” (NIV)
- 1 Peter 3:15** “but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence;” (NASB)
- 2 Timothy 1:6-9** “... fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you... God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord... by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)
- Philemon 1:6** “I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)
- Psalms 107:2-43** “Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story... they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way... Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind, for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things... they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness, the utter darkness, and broke away their chains. Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds... tell of his works with songs of joy... Let the one who is wise heed these things and ponder the loving deeds of the LORD.” (NIV)

Great beauty exists that even this fallen world cannot destroy or hide. We need to learn to appreciate it and let beauty bring us the Joy and Peace for which it was designed. At the same time, we also have to appreciate that terrible destruction is inflicted every day upon the inhabitants of this planet, and the resulting sadness is something we as God’s children are called upon to tend like an open wound, with compassion, diligence, and an expertise that comes from following the One who has been called the “Great Physician.”

- 1 Thessalonians 5:5-28** “You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled... since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but

to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that... we may live together with Him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up... Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus... Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil... May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and He will do it... The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

2 Corinthians 6:1-10 "... we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain... giving no cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry be not discredited... as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things." (NASB)

Titus 2:7,8 "in all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, with purity in doctrine, dignified, sound in speech which is beyond reproach, so that the opponent will be put to shame, having nothing bad to say about us." (NASB)

Matthew 5:14-16 "You are the light of the world... Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." (NASB)

Great sadness also exists, and it will continue to multiply because the free will that gives it birth is an inextricable part of the inhabitants of this fallen world. As long as people are allowed to choose between good and evil, sadness will populate the earth. But while sadness will always be a part of this life, we must also appreciate that we do not have to be overwhelmed by it. We can stand up before the onslaught of sadness and rise above it, and find Joy and Peace in the midst of a drowning world. How? Why? Because not only are we born in to a sad, fallen world, but as God's children we have also been born anew into a living hope.

John 16:33 through 17:26 " 'I (*Jesus*) have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.' After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: 'Father... I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world... My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me... Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them,

and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.’ ” (NIV)

1 Peter 1:1-17 “... To God’s elect, strangers in the world... Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power... In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy... Since you call on a Father who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Ephesians 1:18,19 “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe...” (NASB)

We are: Born into a living Hope.

We initially have a physical birth into the fallen world. Our mortal bodies come into existence at some point in time somewhere upon planet earth. But as we saw earlier, when we choose to receive Jesus as our Savior we experience a second birth – a spiritual birth. And this birth is not into a fallen world, but into a living hope.

John 3:3-6 “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God... That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.’ ” (NASB)

1 Peter 1:23,24 “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For, ‘All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever’...” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 5:17,18 “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

1 Peter 1:3-9 “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope... Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him, now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy,” (NIV)

Our hope as God’s children is not like the world’s hope. The world’s hope is a dead hope, a deluded hope, a sad attempt at wishful thinking. It’s believing “maybe something good will happen and maybe it won’t, but I sure hope it does, although realistically it probably won’t unless I get really lucky.” It’s an appeal to chance,

which is the best this world can offer, and in some respects it's the spark of so much fear in the world. When we are lost in the fallen world, we get scared, because deep down inside we know our hope is a sham. There is nothing standing behind our hope as a guarantee it will come to pass, except an unreliable, fallen world that sometimes rewards and sometimes curses with little rhyme or reason and without ever truly fulfilling our desire for happiness. At best, our hope is a crap shoot that we'll find something to distract us from the sadness that dogs our steps through an uncertain life.

Job 8:13,14 "... the hope of the godless will perish, whose confidence is fragile, and whose trust a spider's web." (NASB)

Job 27:8 "For what is the hope of the godless when he is cut off, when God requires his life?" (NASB)

Proverbs 11:7 "When a wicked man dies, his hope perishes; all he expected from his power comes to nothing." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Job 18:5,11 "The lamp of the wicked man is snuffed out... Terrors startle him on every side and dog his every step." (NIV)

1 Thessalonians 4:13 "Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to... grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope." (NIV)

But the living hope that comes from a relationship with God is vibrant and alive, because the One who stands behind it is vibrant and alive. We have a living hope, because God is alive and powerful, and He keeps His promises. Our hope is not wishful thinking. It is confident assurance that our holy, loving God is and He means what He says. There is a backstop to our hope, and it is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, who loves us so much He sent His beloved Son to die for us. And so instead of a lifeless, deluded, half-hearted, wishful hope that comes only with the backing of a sad, fallen world, we have a living, lucid, whole-hearted, confident hope that comes with the backing of an almighty, trustworthy God.

Psalms 146:5,6 "Blessed are those... whose hope is in the LORD their God. He is the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them — he remains faithful forever." (NIV)

Hebrews 10:22,23 "let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings... Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful." (NIV)

Hebrews 6:17-19 "... God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear... it is impossible for God to lie... we have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure..." (NIV)

Lamentations 3:21-25 "This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. The LORD's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. 'The LORD is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I have hope in Him.' The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him." (NASB)

Isaiah 40:28-31 "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired

or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” (NIV)

Psalm 33:1-22 “Sing joyfully to the LORD... For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does... the eyes of the LORD are on... those whose hope is in his unfailing love... We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. May your unfailing love be with us, LORD, even as we put our hope in you.” (NIV)

So exactly what is our hope? What promises do we have from God that can actually bring us an authentic happiness in a fallen world? What is it we believe that in turn creates this hope that brings us strength and power over the sadness of the world and allows us to know Joy and Peace?

We could go on for an awfully long time, but here are a few examples:

- God is.

Isaiah 45:18-22 “For this is what the LORD says – he who created the heavens... he who fashioned and made the earth... he says: ‘I am the LORD and there is no other... I, the LORD, speak the truth... there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior... Turn to me and be saved... for I am God, and there is no other.’ ” (NIV)

- God cares.

Jeremiah 31:3 “... I (*God*) have loved you with an everlasting love...” (NIV)

Psalm 103:11 “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love...” (NIV)

1 Peter 5:6,7 “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.” (NIV)

- God is able to provide everything I could ever need.

Jeremiah 32:17 “Ah Lord GOD! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for you,” (NASB)

Ephesians 3:20,21 “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.” (NIV)

Matthew 6:8 “... your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.” (NASB)

- Amidst the vastness of the universe, God knows me, He understands me, and He loves me.

Psalm 139:1-16 “You have searched me, LORD, and you know me... For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made... your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.” (NIV)

Job 10:8-12 “Your (*God’s*) hands shaped me and made me... Remember that you molded me like clay... Did you not... knit me together with bones and sinews? You gave me life...” (NIV)

Matthew 10:29-31 “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Romans 5:8 “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (NASB)

- God has a purpose for my life that is wholly and eternally good.

Isaiah 46:9-11 “... I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure’... I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it.” (NASB)

Jeremiah 29:11 “ ‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’ ” (NIV)

Ephesians 2:10 “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Psalm 25:1-9 “To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul; in you I trust... No one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame... Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long. Remember, O LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you are good, O LORD. Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Isaiah 42:5,6 “This is what God the LORD says – the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: ‘I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you... a light...’ ” (NIV)

- If I let Him, God will guide and direct me to His plan and purpose.

Proverbs 3:5,6 “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” (NIV)

Luke 11:9-13 “So I (*Jesus*) say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened. Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he? Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give...to those who ask Him?” (NASB)

Isaiah 58:11 “and the LORD will continually guide you, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, and give strength to your bones; and you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.” (NASB)

- If I let Him, God will enable me to fulfill His plan and purpose.

Philippians 4:19 “... God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” (NASB)

Matthew 6:25-34 “... do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” (NIV)

Ephesians 3:16 “... be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man,” (NASB)

Philippians 4:13 “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” (NASB)

- If I ask Him, God will save me from my sin and grant me eternal life.

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” (NASB)

Romans 6:23 “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NASB)

Acts 16:31 “... Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved...” (NIV)

- If I ask Him, God will forgive me when I fail Him.

Micah 7:18,19 “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression... You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.” (NIV)

Isaiah 1:18-20 “... ‘Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool. If you consent and obey’... Truly, the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (NASB)

1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (NASB)

Psalms 32:5 “I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD’; and You forgave the guilt of my sin.” (NASB)

- If I let Him, God will renew me after I fail Him.

Hebrews 12:1-13 “... let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith... FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES... God deals with you as with sons; for what son is their whom his father does not discipline?... All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.” (NASB)

Philippians 3:13,14 “... forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 7:10,11 “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done...” (NIV)

James 4:6 “... GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE.” (NASB)

Jeremiah 15:19 “... If you repent, I (*God*) will restore you that you may serve me...” (NIV)

- No matter what I do, God will never abandon or forsake me.

Deuteronomy 31:6-8 “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified... for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you... The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.” (NIV)

2 Timothy 2:13 “If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.” (NASB)

- If I let Him, God will sustain me during times of trial.

Psalm 55:22 “Cast your burden upon the LORD, and He will sustain you; He will never allow the righteous to be shaken.” (NASB)

Philippians 4:6,7 “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (NASB)

2 Chronicles 16:9 “For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His...” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 10:13 “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.” (NASB)

1 Peter 5:6,7 “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.” (NIV)

- If I let Him, God will grant me Joy and Peace regardless of my circumstance.

Jeremiah 15:16 “... Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart...” (NASB)

Romans 15:13 “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (NIV)

Philippians 4:11-20 “I (*Paul*) have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me... And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen.” (NASB)

2 Thessalonians 3:16 “Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance. The Lord be with you all!” (NASB)

- When I die, God will take me to live eternally with Him.

John 3:36 “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.” (NASB)

Revelation 21:3,4 “... God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 15:50-58 "... flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable... the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality... then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' ... thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." (NIV)

- God will reward my faithfulness.

Hebrews 11:6 "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." (NIV)

Romans 8:18 "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us." (NASB)

2 Corinthians 4:17,18 "For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal." (NASB)

Matthew 19:28-30 "Jesus said to them, 'I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne... everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.' " (NIV)

Hebrews 6:10-12 "God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him... We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised." (NIV)

Isaiah 49:23 "... those who hope in me (*God*) will not be disappointed." (NIV)

1 Corinthians 2:9 "but just as it is written, 'THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.' " (NASB)

That's a pretty short, bare-bones list, but it's also pretty great. In fact, it's better than our finite minds can even begin to comprehend! Notice how our hope alleviates every fear we could ever have – of being alone, abandoned, without purpose, aid, or shelter, without (for lack of a better phrase) a "happy ending" to this life. All our fears are swept away by the eternal, trustworthy, unbreakable word of the living God. And...

If we truly believe this, it changes everything forever.

If we *truly* believe these things, then it *will* change (in a good way!) *every* facet of our lives *forever*. Please don't gloss over these words. It's not one of those throw away, "rah, rah" cheers we seem to hear a lot but never really believe. Every word if it is true. Really true. Truly true. Absolutely and one hundred percent true! Our lives really will change in every conceivable way, not just for a little while, but forever. And it will change in a way that will bring us Joy "inexpressible" and Peace "surpassing comprehension" in the midst of a fallen world.

When we humbly choose to trust God's Word, this act of faith creates within us hope, and hope (that is, the living hope that comes from God, not the wishful thinking of the world) gives us an unconquerable power over everything. There is nothing in the world that is greater or stronger than the hope that comes from faith in God. Whatever sadness or evil the world throws at us will break against the hope that fills our hearts and minds, if we will stand firm in our faith that God will be true to His Word.

2 Corinthians 1:3-24 "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows... We (*Paul and his friends*) were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God... On him we have set our hope... Now it is God who makes... you stand firm in Christ. He... set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come... because it is by faith you stand firm." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." (NIV)

Ephesians 6:10-17 "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." (NIV)

1 Peter 5:8-11 “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. And the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To Him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Romans 15:13 “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him...” (NIV)

This doesn't mean we won't feel legitimate grief or sorrow in our lives. We will. If we are following Jesus, we will encounter trials and tribulations in our lives that will hurt deeply. We can count on it. But along with these trials we will have something the world does not – a hope more powerful than the grief that besets us, which will bring us Joy and Peace in the midst of the storm.

Psalms 34:19 “Many are the afflictions of the righteous...” (NASB)

2 Timothy 3:12 “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,” (NIV)

1 Peter 4:12-19 “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed... Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

1 Thessalonians 4:13 “Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to... grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 4:1-16 “... we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God... For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body... Therefore we do not lose heart...” (NIV)

1 Peter 1:1-17 “... To God's elect, strangers in the world... Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth

into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power... In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy... Since you call on a Father who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Psalm 46:1-3 “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains quake at its swelling pride.” (NASB)

The heart of the challenges to our faith.

Hope conquers everything from the petty annoyances of life to our greatest fears and tragedies. Did someone you love die? If they accepted Jesus as their Savior, you know your loss, as great as it is, is only temporary. You will be with them again in heaven, in the presence of God, for all eternity. That’s our “hope.”

John 11:25 “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies,’ ” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 15:52-58 “... the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed... this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, ‘DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP IN VICTORY. O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?’... thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.” (NASB)

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 “Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him... And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.” (NIV)

Revelation 21:1-4 “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away... And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.’ ” (NASB)

Were you unsure of their salvation? Trust that God is fair; and He gave them every opportunity to be saved; and no one loves them more than God; and you don't know everything that ever happened in this person's life; and if there was ever a moment they would have received salvation, God knew about it and took advantage of it, whether you ever learned about it or not. God loves them even more than you (in fact, infinitely more than you), and if they ever humbled their heart to receive a Savior, God found a way to make the Gospel clear and real so they could be saved.

And if they never heard the Gospel, then God knows what they would have done if they had heard it and will act accordingly. He is holy and He is love. And our "hope" (confident assurance, not wishful thinking) is that our God can act no other way. He sees all that is, was, will be, or could have been, and if this fallen world cuts a life short or deprives someone of something as essential as the Gospel of Jesus, then God will be fair and just with them, and (as we shall see in the Coda to this work) in eternity God will make all things new and all things right.

Matthew 25:31-40 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'" (NIV)

Is a child ill? Are you or a loved one the victim of a terrible crime? Lost your job? Cheated on by a spouse? Betrayed by a trusted friend? Abandoned by a parent? Diagnosed with cancer? We can go on and on.

The heart of these mighty challenges to our faith is whether we will trust that:

- God, as unfathomable as it may seem, has a reason for all things, even the indescribably hurtful things; and
- God, if we trust Him despite the hurt, will one day somehow reveal His purpose and reward our faith.

God does not *cause* all things, but, as we have seen earlier in this study, He *allows* all things. And what He allows is for a *reason*. Even the indescribably hurtful things brought into the world by the choices of men and women to do evil are woven into the fabric of human history in keeping with the ultimate plan and purpose of God. One day – and that day might not be until after we step through the doors of death and into eternity – God will make the reason for all things known, and those who trusted Him will receive rewards for their faithfulness that far outweigh the hurt that was endured. This is our hope.

Matthew 19:28-30 “Jesus said to them, ‘I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne... everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.’ ” (NIV)

Matthew 5:5-45 “Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth... Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great... love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven...” (NASB)

1 Peter 2:17-23 “Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king. Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable. For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps... while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously;” (NASB)

Luke 6:27-36 “... love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you... If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same... But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 4:17,18 “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (NASB)

Romans 8:17-28 “... we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us... And we know that God

causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” (NASB)

Romans 8:31-39 “What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NIV)

1 Peter 4:19 “Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

Hope can conquer all sadness and fear because the faith that creates it is so powerful. But this faith can be no small or easy thing, especially when it is called upon in times of true heartbreak. And this is where the “rubber hits the road.” This is where we find out who we truly are. Notice *we* find out. God is omniscient. He already knows. But we don’t, and through this process of discovery God’s wish is that we develop a genuine, deep, and abiding relationship with Him.

Hebrews 10:22,23 “let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.” (NIV)

James 4:8 “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you...” (NASB)

And those kinds of relationships don’t ordinarily develop on long walks through beautiful gardens. (It didn’t for Adam and Eve!) That’s just not human nature. Some relationships grow in good times, but they tend to be superficial and they are undeniably untested. The kind of closeness God wants to have with us as His beloved children seems to be developed most often while desperately clinging to one another as the world crumbles around us. That’s human nature. That’s life in a fallen world. And that’s why God is able to use the suffering inherent in a world where people are free to choose between good and evil as a means to test our hearts so we can thereby grow closer to Him.

Proverbs 17:3 “The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tests hearts.” (NASB)

1 Peter 1:6-8 “... you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though

- you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory,” (NASB)
- James 1:2-4** “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (NASB)
- Ephesians 4:14-24** “... we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine... but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him... lay aside the old self... and... be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.” (NASB)
- 2 Peter 1:3-8** “... His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him... He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature... Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (NASB)

In all this, an important thing for us to realize is that the question is not whether our *hope* is great enough to stand up to the hurt and sadness in the world. It is, because our hope is in the unfailing promises of God that are greater than anything the world can throw at us. The question we have to ask ourselves is whether our *faith* is strong enough to stand up to the hurt and sadness in the world. It may or may not be, depending on the choices we freely make. Are we willing to trust God in the face of real suffering? Hope, Christian love, Joy and Peace – they all spring from the underlying foundation of choices we make to trust God; that is, to put our faith in Him. Let’s look at an example of the kind of faith God wants us to have if we wish to truly know Joy and Peace in a fallen world.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego – The beginning, growth, maturity, and end of true faith (God always saves).

This story of the three guys with the funny names is a Sunday school favorite. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were friends of Daniel in ancient Israel. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took them all into captivity circa 606 B.C. after his siege and conquest of Jerusalem. These young men rose in favor in the court of the king and occupied positions of influence within his realm because of their ability and integrity. See Daniel 1 & 2.

Nebuchadnezzar then built a golden statue, ninety feet high and nine feet wide, and commanded all the people to bow down and worship it or be “cast into the midst of

a furnace of blazing fire.” Daniel 3:6. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused, and when the king angrily confronted them, here was their reply:

Daniel 3:16-18 “Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, ‘King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.’ ” (NIV)

Notice these young men don’t try any funny stuff. They don’t attempt to finesse the situation with smooth, politically correct double talk. This is a black and white issue of whether they will bow down to God almighty or a hunk of shiny metal. So they don’t tiptoe around anything. They take their stand, and speak the truth in love. How?

First, they begin with a confident assertion that *God is able to save*, stating “the God we serve is able to save us.” There is no danger or dilemma on earth, even a fiery furnace, which is greater than God’s ability to protect the children He loves. *This is where true faith begins*, with eyes focused on the sufficiency of God to handle any and all of the problems we encounter in this fallen world.

Isaiah 40:25-31 “‘To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal’ says the Holy One. Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing. Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, ‘My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God’? Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” (NIV)

Romans 8:31-39 “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things... Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NASB)

Isaiah 51:7-13 “... Do not fear the reproach of mere mortals or be terrified by their insults... Who are you that you fear mere mortals, human beings who are but grass, that you forget the LORD your Maker, who stretches out the heavens and who lays the foundations of the earth, that you live in constant terror every day...” (NIV)

Jeremiah 32:17 “Ah Lord GOD! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for you,” (NASB)

Next, they say God “will rescue us from your hand.” Within this statement there is something implicit and something explicit. Implicitly, they express their belief that *God desires to save*. They know God loves them. They know God desires nothing but good for them. And they know God will not let them down. *This is where true faith grows*. We know God is infinitely able to care for us, and that’s good. We also know He infinitely desires to care for us, and that’s even better. God will not stand aloof when His children are in danger. He is right there, with His eyes fixed upon us, poised to act on our behalf.

1 Timothy 2:3,4 “... God our Savior... desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (NASB)

2 Chronicles 16:9 “For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His...” (NASB)

Isaiah 41:10-14 “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand... For I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, do not fear; I will help you. Do not be afraid...” (NIV)

Joshua 1:9 “... Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.” (NIV)

Isaiah 35:3,4 “Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, ‘Be strong, do not fear; your God... will come to save you.’” (NIV)

Isaiah 12:2 “Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The LORD... is my strength and my song...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Luke 18:7,8 “now shall not God bring about justice for His elect, who cry to him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them speedily. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?” (NASB)

But Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego didn’t say God “desires” to save them. They explicitly say God “will” save them. How can they declare that so unequivocally? How can they say with absolute confidence God will without a doubt save them?

These remarkable young men were not naïve when it comes to the ways of the fallen world. In their youth they were taken by an invading army against their will from their families and the smoking ruins of the city of their birth to a foreign land, and

they now find themselves at the mercy of one of the most powerful men in recorded history who regularly executes people who displease him. They have personally experienced the brutality of the world, and so they are well aware that sometimes, if but temporarily, evil triumphs in this imperfect place.

We've looked at this earlier in our study several times. We live in a fallen world where free will is truly free, and the only way to keep evil from occurring at times would be to remove our freedom to choose from us, which God will not do. The inevitable result is that sometimes evil things come to pass in this fallen world, and good people suffer and even die.

This can be one of the most difficult things for us to come to terms with in this life. But if we look at what is truly happening from God's point of view, we discover something vital to knowing Joy and Peace in a fallen world that is revealed in the response of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. At the end of the day, when it's all said and done, from God's perspective (not the world's perspective), *God always saves.*

How can we say this, when we look around and see good people suffering and dying on a regular basis? It sure doesn't look like they are being saved from where we sit. But from where God sits, that's exactly what it looks like. He doesn't see a life coming to a dark end. He sees the suffering and sadness coming to an end, and the beginning of life eternal in His glorious presence. He's pulling His child out of the darkness of the fallen world and bringing him or her into the light of heaven. All the bad stuff is coming to an end forever, and all the good stuff is beginning and will never end. That is truly being saved.

1 Samuel 16:7 "... for God sees not as man sees..." (NASB)

Isaiah 57:1,2 "The righteous perish, and no one takes it to heart; the devout are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil. Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death." (NIV)

God always saves His children. Always. The only question is whether He's going to save them *temporarily* or *permanently*. Sometimes, God saves by reaching down and thwarting evil. It's a divine smack down of the bad guys, followed by a grateful celebration by the good guys. But the truth is: That's only a temporary fix. Evil will eventually be back to take another cheap shot at us – and another and another and another – because that is the relentless nature of evil. So as great as it is when God saves us from bad things, wise men and women know that most likely it's only a matter of time before evil has another go.

2 Timothy 3:10-17 "You, however, know all about my (*Paul's*)... sufferings – what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,

while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of... so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (NIV)

Psalm 34:19 “The righteous person may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all;” (NIV)

The permanent fix is when God takes us out of this world and into His, and when we come to understand what awaits us in the realm of our Heavenly Father, we begin to see the truly grave circumstances that threaten our lives, not as a failure of God to care for us, but as the approach of the fulfillment of His greatest promise. For the child of God, death is not the ultimate destruction, it is the *ultimate healing*, and therefore death has no power over us. It’s not the end of life. It’s the end of the struggle with the fallen world and the sadness that comes with it. And as we shall see in the Coda, it’s the beginning of life in a perfect world where God makes everything new and everything right.

1 Corinthians 15:50-58 “... flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable... the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality... then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’ ... thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” (NIV)

Philippians 1:18-28 “... I (*Paul*) will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and God’s provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me. Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ... stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved – and that by God.” (NIV)

The world will tell you this is a colossal and thoroughly idiotic cop out. It’s a Christian delusion. But the world believes this because the world has no hope. It has

no concept of all of the promises we have seen that pour out of a holy, loving God, so it cannot fathom what it's like to be His child. But we can, and when we begin to grasp the limitless expanse of God's amazing grace and love for us, and see our lives, not as just a finite span between the bookends of our physical birth and death, but as a never ending relationship with our Creator that is born, then grows, and ultimately accelerates into and throughout all eternity, then we have a true, empowering perspective on life that forever changes the way we look at the idea of being "saved."

Ephesians 3:14-21 "For this reason, I (*Paul*) bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen." (NASB)

When we grow to this point where we see death not as a permanent ending but as a permanent healing, then like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego we can confidently declare that no matter what the circumstances, even in death, *God will save*. We may suffer, and the suffering may continue for a period of time, but that period cannot be indefinite. Eventually, God's salvation will come to us, and if it comes in the form of death, then our faith is that this is the greatest salvation of all, when God's plan for this life is over and God's plan for the next life begins. *This is where true faith matures*. It builds to a relationship so strong and authentic, we trust our Heavenly Father even when facing our greatest fears.

Psalms 23:1-4 "The LORD is my shepherd... Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me." (NASB)

This liberation from the fear of death is imperative if we are to know Joy and Peace in a fallen world. There is no way we can have passion and contentment in this life if we are terrified of its ending. Then we would make any compromise necessary, even the most unthinkable, in order to cling to life. And though this might prolong our time on earth, it would deprive us of any Joy or Peace during it.

Job 8:12-19 "... they wither more quickly than grass. Such is the destiny of all who forget God; so perishes the hope of the godless. What they trust in is fragile; what they rely on is a spider's web. They lean on the web, but it gives way; they cling to it, but it does not hold. They are like a well-watered plant in the sunshine, spreading its shoots over the garden; it entwines its roots around a pile of rocks and looks for a place among the stones. But when it is torn from

its spot, that place disowns it and says, 'I never saw you.' Surely its life withers away, and from the soil other plants grow." (NIV)

Hebrews 2:14,15 "... he (*Jesus*) too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might... free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." (NIV)

God wants us to look at death the opposite way the world does. The world fears death. God wants us to be unafraid. The world sees death as the end of life and the good things within it. God wants us to see death as the beginning of life eternal and the good things within it, with the only thing coming to an end being the struggle with the fallen world and the sadness with which it is filled. Perhaps the greatest fear the world has of death is the uncertainty of what lies beyond it. Perhaps the greatest comfort God wants us to have is the certainty of what awaits us when we pass through death's door and step into His presence.

Proverbs 14:32 "When calamity comes, the wicked are brought down, but even in death the righteous seek refuge in God." (NIV)

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 "Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him... For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise... And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words." (NIV)

Mature followers of Jesus view life as something utterly precious, a true gift from God to be treasured, and we make the most of every single moment we are granted. We never go about recklessly seeking death, but nor do we despair when death comes recklessly seeking us. We know God has a plan for our lives and until it is fulfilled, nothing can take our lives from us. But once we have completed God's plan, we also know nothing can keep us here. Nor do we want to stay here, if we have truly accomplished God's purpose, because we know where we are headed. And so we are prepared to face whatever is God's will for our lives as determined by His plan. And our faith is that whatever the outcome, God's will is best and for our ultimate good.

Psalms 91:1-16 "Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.' Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked. If you say, 'The LORD is my refuge,' and you

- make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways... 'Because he loves me,' says the LORD, 'I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him. With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation.' ” (NIV)
- Romans 8:28** “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” (NASB)
- Proverbs 16:4-20** “The LORD works out everything to its proper end – even the wicked for a day of disaster. The LORD detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished... blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD.” (NIV)
- Isaiah 48:17** “This is what the LORD says – your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: ‘I am the LORD your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go.’ ” (NIV)
- Ecclesiastes 7:15-29** “In this meaningless life of mine I (*Solomon*) have seen both of these: the righteous perishing in their righteousness, and the wicked living long in their wickedness... So I turned my mind to understand, to investigate and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things... This only have I found: God made mankind upright, but they have gone in search of many schemes.” (NIV)
- Ecclesiastes 3:16-18** “And I (*Solomon*) saw something else under the sun: In the place of judgment – wickedness was there, in the place of justice – wickedness was there. I said to myself, ‘God will bring into judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed.’ I also said to myself, ‘As for humans, God tests them...’ ” (NIV)
- 1 Peter 4:12-19** “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed... Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)
- 2 Corinthians 4:17,18** “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (NASB)
- Romans 8:18** “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (NASB)
- Revelation 21:3,4** “... God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.” (NASB)

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego understand these things. They know God is able to save, God desires to save, and one way or another, either temporarily or permanently, God will save. And so finally they express that *even if God doesn't intervene the way we want, we still trust Him*, stating “even if he does not (keep us from the furnace), we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods...” *This is where true faith ends.* With a mighty, final, absolute stand that no matter what comes to pass, even if it's the worst thing imaginable in the world's eyes, we trust that God is acting for our ultimate good, and our hope is in Him.

When men and women and boys and girls lay this kind of faith at the feet of our God, our puny little finite minds cannot even begin to comprehend the glory, honor, and praise that is lifted up to our Heavenly Father, the blinding light that reaches to the darkest corners of the fallen world, and the Joy, Peace, and blessing that will come to the person who places this kind of true faith in a holy, loving God.

Matthew 5:5-45 “Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth... Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you... You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven... whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also... love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven...” (NASB)

Philippians 2:14-16 “Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life...” (NASB)

2 Thessalonians 1:11,12 “... we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (NIV)

1 Peter 4:11 “... If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.” (NIV)

And this is exactly the kind of faith God wants us to have. He wants us to trust that He is able to save, He desires to save, and He will save, one way or another, either temporarily or permanently, because whatever comes to pass, He is working for our ultimate good in keeping with His purpose for our lives. Then He wants us to trust Him even if we don't get what we want, even if He does not do what we expect or desire Him to do. He wants us to believe He is always working to bring about what is best for us according to His plan, and to trust Him no matter what. God wants our

relationship with Him to grow so strong and so real that in our darkest hour we can honestly lift our prayers to Him and say:

- I believe You are able to save me;
- I believe You desire to save me;
- I believe You will save me (one way or another, either temporarily or permanently); and
- No matter what happens, I trust you.

Isaiah 50:10 “... Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on their God.” (NIV)

The winds and waves of fear.

If we are being honest, the thought of being called to have this kind of faith can be a little daunting (or perhaps more precisely, downright scary). The average healthy person has no desire to be chosen to take this kind of stand, especially when staring into the flames of a devouring furnace, whether literal or something figurative but with the same destructive power.

But it's OK to feel that way. Most likely this is exactly the way Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego felt. It's doubtful they made their extraordinary proclamation of faith in the absence of a deeply felt urge to turn around and run like crazy. What's amazing is the power of our hope to inspire us to stand firm in the face of a tsunami of fear and speak the truth in love with courage and conviction.

The interesting thing about fear and how God's grace allows us to overcome it is not that it magically eliminates the feeling of fear within us. Instead, it allows fear to continually pass through us, like wind through a screen. Fear does not reside within and hinder, but rather passes through without lasting effect. It is felt, but not surrendered to. Its presence is there, but its power is not.

Said another way, waves of fear may crash upon us when we are called to take God's stand, but they do not carry us away and drown us in the depths. In the confidence and courage of our hope we find a resilience that allows the tides of fear to fall to our feet and melt away. We might feel drenched, but we are still able to stand.

Matthew 7:24-27 “Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine (*Jesus*) and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the

floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell – and great was its fall.” (NASB)

In the same way, we may feel fear, but we are not overpowered by it. There are times in life where only an irrational person would not feel fear, and the faith, hope, and love God provides are not irrational. Quite the contrary, our faith is wholly rational based upon our trust in the unwavering promises of God. And so instead of eliminating the *feeling* of fear, what our faith does is eliminate the *power* of fear. Though feelings of fear may flow through us, they do not paralyze us, because our faith in God’s Word calms and strengthens our minds with hope, which allows us to take our stand and speak the truth in love. Most often, the greatest acts of faith are performed, not in the absence of fear, but directly in the center of its clamorous yet impotent presence.

Psalm 56:3 “When I am afraid, I will put my trust in You.” (NASB)

Psalm 37:1-40 “Do not fret because of evildoers... for they will wither quickly like the grass... Trust in the LORD, and do good... Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He will do it. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light... Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him... the LORD sustains the righteous. The LORD knows the days of the blameless; and their inheritance will be forever... Wait for the LORD, and keep His way, and He will exalt you... the salvation of the righteous is from the LORD; He is their strength in time of trouble. The LORD helps them and delivers them; He delivers them from the wicked and saves them, because they take refuge in Him.” (NASB)

Isaiah 26:3,4 “The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect peace, because he trusts in You. Trust in the LORD forever, for in GOD the LORD, we have an everlasting Rock.” (NASB)

What God is after: Faith unto death that leads to life.

In considering these things we should be sure to note how the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego ends. While they had the faith to give up their lives for God, they were not actually called upon to do so. God saved them in a miraculous way and then richly rewarded their faith.

Daniel 3:19-30 “Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. The king’s command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace. Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers,

‘Weren’t there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?’ They replied, ‘Certainly, Your Majesty.’ He said, ‘Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.’ Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, ‘Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!’ So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them. Then Nebuchadnezzar said, ‘Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king’s command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way.’ Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon.” (NIV)

It was also the same way with Job. God called Job to trust Him, even to the point of death, but God did not actually allow Job’s life to be taken. God saved Job, and then piled on the rewards for his faith.

Job 1:6-22 “Now there was a day when the sons of God (*angels*) came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. The LORD said to Satan, ‘From where do you come?’ Then Satan answered the LORD and said, ‘From roaming about on the earth and walking around on it.’ The LORD said to Satan, ‘Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil.’ Then Satan answered the LORD, ‘Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth Your hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse You to Your face.’ Then the LORD said to Satan, ‘Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not put forth your hand on him.’ So Satan departed from the presence of the LORD. Now on the day when his sons and his daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother’s house... (*Job lost the lives of all his children and all his wealth in a matter of just a few moments.*) Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped. He said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD.’ Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God.” (NASB)

Job 2:1-13 “Again there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD. The LORD said to Satan, ‘Where have you come from?’ Then Satan answered the LORD and said, ‘From roaming about on the earth and

walking around on it.' The LORD said to Satan, 'Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man fearing God and turning away from evil. And he still holds fast his integrity, although you incited Me against him to ruin him without cause.' Satan answered the LORD and said, 'Skin for skin! Yes, all that a man has he will give for his life. However, put forth Your hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh; he will curse You to Your face.' So the LORD said to Satan, 'Behold, he is in your power, only spare his life.' Then Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. And he took a potsherd to scrape himself while he was sitting among the ashes. Then his wife said to him, 'Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die!' But he said to her, 'You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?' In all this Job did not sin with his lips. Now when Job's three friends heard of all this adversity that had come upon him, they came each one from his own place, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite; and they made an appointment together to come to sympathize with him and comfort him. When they lifted up their eyes at a distance and did not recognize him, they raised their voices and wept. And each of them tore his robe and they threw dust over their heads toward the sky. Then they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great." (NASB)

Job 13:15 "Though He slay me, I will hope in Him..." (NASB)

Job 42:7-17 "After the LORD had said these things... the LORD restored his (*Job's*) fortunes and gave him twice as much as he had before... The LORD blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the former part. He had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen and a thousand donkeys. And he also had seven sons and three daughters. The first daughter he named Jemimah (*meaning "dove"*), the second Keziah (*"cinnamon"*) and the third Keren-Happuch (*"container of antimony," a highly prized eye shadow*). Nowhere in all the land were there found women as beautiful as Job's daughters, and their father granted them an inheritance along with their brothers. After this, Job lived a hundred and forty years; he saw his children and their children to the fourth generation. And so Job died, an old man and full of years (*an idiom for extremely happy and content*)." (NIV)

The thing to take away from this is: While God calls everyone to have faith even to the point of death, He rarely calls upon anyone to actually die for Him. That, in a sense, was the purpose of Jesus. Jesus died once for all, and He did so, not so we too could all *die* for God, but so we could all *live* for God.

2 Corinthians 5:15 "And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." (NIV)

1 Thessalonians 5:10-28 "He died for us so that... we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up... encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays

back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus... Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil... May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it... The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Really live. Truly live. Not just exist, in the sense that we grudgingly slug it out day after day doing our duty for Him without any Joy, but fully live for Him in the sense that every thought, word, and deed is intended as an act of joyful service to our God and fellow mankind with the confident belief that our lives have meaning, purpose, and eternal value.

1 Timothy 6:11-18 "... pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called... In the sight of God, who gives life to everything... keep this command without spot or blame... Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life." (NIV)

John 10:10 "... I (*Jesus*) came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (NASB)

That's what God is after. God wants us to have a relationship with Him that is so close, authentic, and resonant it overshadows all else, even mankind's greatest fear: Death. He wants us to trust Him to the point of death, because when we reach this ultimate, transcendent place, then we finally have the kind of faith that allows us to truly live for Him. Our relationship with Him becomes more deep and powerful than death, and that means our life with Him can be an adventure. He can take us by the hand and walk us through times of great blessing and through times of great adversity, and either way, our lives will bring about what God desires for every human life.

Habakkuk 3:17-19 "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength..." (NIV)

Psalms 37:3-34 "Trust in the LORD and do good... delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart... trust in him and he... will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn... The LORD makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him; though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand... Hope in the LORD and keep his way. He will exalt you..." (NIV)

Isaiah 42:5,6 “This is what God the LORD says – the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: ‘I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you... a light...’ ” (NIV)

The desires of God for every life: Glory (to God); Light (to the world); and Joy, Peace, and Reward (to us).

In a sense, God wants the life of every human being to bring about three results:

1. Glory to God;
2. Light to the world; and
3. Joy, Peace, and reward to us.

Our lives should bring *glory to God*. When we faithfully trust God in good times and bad, He is able by His grace to transform us, from self-centered, self-deceived, self-indulgent men and women, to selfless, discerning servants of God and others. This is the greatest *miracle* of all, and it brings glory to God throughout all creation.

1 Peter 4:11 “... If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.” (NIV)

2 Peter 1:2-4 “Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world...” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 3:3,18 “... you are a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts... And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord...” (NIV)

Hebrews 13:20,21 “Now may the God of peace... equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.” (NIV)

Ephesians 3:20,21 “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 10:31 “... whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” (NIV)

Our lives should bring *light to the world*. When we faithfully trust God in good times and bad, our faithful hearts, hopeful minds, and loving deeds illuminate the darkness

of the fallen world like a lamp. This is our greatest *service* of all, when our lives light the way for others to move out from the world's darkness and into the grace of God.

Matthew 5:14-16 “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” (NASB)

Philippians 2:14-16 “Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life...” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 4:6-10 “For God... has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves... that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.” (NASB)

Philippians 2:15 “... become blameless and pure, ‘children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.’ Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky” (NIV)

Our lives should bring *Joy, Peace, and reward to us*. When we faithfully trust God in good times and bad, we are purged of defiance, fear, and hate, and filled with hope and love, and together these things bring us Joy “inexpressible” and Peace “surpassing comprehension.” This is the greatest *experience* of all, what God created us to enjoy during our brief time on earth.

1 Peter 1:1-8 “... To God’s elect, strangers in the world... Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power... In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy,” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Philippians 4:6-9 “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things... practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.” (NASB)

Romans 15:13 “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him...” (NIV)

Along with Joy and Peace, God also desires that we enjoy blessing and reward. But as we have seen earlier in this study, it’s important to differentiate between how God rewards in this life (“in part”) and how He rewards in eternity (“in full”). In this life, God doesn’t ultimately guarantee blessing and reward, only Joy and Peace. And while Joy and Peace are in truth the greatest rewards we could hope for, it’s only natural for us to also desire other more material rewards as well.

The extent to which we receive material rewards in this life depends entirely upon God’s plan and purpose. For example, it might be that we are rewarded with great wealth, because God wants us to use those resources to further His purpose. It also might be that we have little or no material rewards, because we can serve God’s purpose more effectively without them. Most of us will experience lives somewhere in the middle of these two extremes. Regardless of where we fall in this spectrum, if we are to make sense of life in a fallen world and understand how we can come to know Joy and Peace within it, we have to recognize that sometimes, in this life, God chooses to reward us only *in part*.

Hebrews 11:13-40 “All these people (*Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Jacob*) were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them... These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

What is encouraging is that, if we look at God’s Word as a whole, in most of the stories from the Bible (like those of Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and Job), God rewards faithfulness abundantly in this life. He is our Heavenly Father, and He encourages and rewards His children as any loving parent would. It is a rare thing for God to withhold any kind of reward in this life.

Romans 8:31,32 “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?” (NASB)

Luke 11:9-13 “So I (*Jesus*) say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you... Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he?... how much more shall your heavenly Father give... to those who ask Him?” (NASB)

Luke 6:35-38 “But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men... Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure – pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return.” (NASB)

Hebrews 11:6 “... anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (NIV)

Proverbs 22:4 “The reward of humility and the fear of the LORD are riches, honor and life.” (NIV)

Hebrews 6:10 “God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him...” (NIV)

Psalms 62:1-12 “My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken... Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken. My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge... One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong, and that you, O Lord, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Yet there are also examples in the Bible of faithful men and women who didn't receive their reward in full in this life, and indeed some lives that were cut short. Why? Because for some reason – and sometimes the reason is known only to God – it was in keeping with God's purpose for His children to suffer and/or die, and their sacrifice somehow furthered His plan for human history.

Hebrews 11:32-40 “And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated – the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better...” (NIV)

This can be very difficult to accept, and here is where we are called to have “faith unto death,” whether that death is our own or someone we love – or even something other than physical death, like the death of a long cherished dream. We have to trust

that, even in these truly heartbreaking circumstances, God's will is still for our ultimate good, and although we may have our reward in this life only in part, what awaits us in the next life is something very different.

2 Corinthians 6:1-10 "... we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain... giving no cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry will not be discredited, but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger, in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love, in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left, by glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; regarded as deceivers and yet true; as unknown yet well-known, as dying yet behold, we live; as punished yet not put to death, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things." (NASB)

Acts 5:40-42 "... They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah." (NASB)

Isaiah 48:17 "This is what the LORD says – your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: 'I am the LORD your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go.'" (NIV)

1 Peter 4:19 "Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right." (NASB – 1975 ed.)

In the next life, God promises unequivocally we will have our reward *in full*. And as we have seen, this reward is not restricted by the confines of life in a fallen world, but instead is liberated by the limitless possibilities of life in eternity. In eternity God makes all things new and all things right, and He does so utilizing all of His infinite resources forever. This means no matter what we are called upon to sacrifice in this life for God, even if it's our very lives, God will make it up to us many times over in the next life. And that's far better than our finite minds can even begin to comprehend.

Revelation 2:10 "... Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I (*Jesus*) will give you the crown of life." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Matthew 5:5-45 "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth... Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you... whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also... love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven..." (NASB)

2 Corinthians 4:17,18 “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (NASB)

Matthew 19:28-30 “Jesus said to them, ‘I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne... everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.’ ” (NIV)

Revelation 7:17 “for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 2:9 “but just as it is written, ‘THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.’ ” (NASB)

“Faith unto death” makes all of this possible. When we are willing to trust God, even to the point of death, then we are finally equipped to truly live for Him in a way that will allow us to be fruitful in His service and accomplish His plan and purpose. And those lives will be adventures, filled most likely with chapters that vary wildly in tone, but which each contain unique illustrations of glory, light, Joy, Peace, and reward.

Imagine two things: How God feels and what God could do.

Take a moment and try to imagine something: *How must God feel when we do not trust Him?* If you are a good parent, then you know how hurtful it feels when your child do not trust that you love or intend the best for them. You would gladly step in front of a speeding train to save your child, and you cannot fathom doing anything other than what would help him or her most. With a love this powerful, if your child then turns around and doubts you, it hurts deeply.

It hurts us, and at best we are flawed, imperfect parents. Think how much more it hurts God, who is the perfect parent. We say we would die for our kids, but we are rarely called upon to do so. God actually did it. He became a man, Jesus Christ, and died, not just for one child, but for all humanity. And He died for us despite the fact that many of us are the most ungrateful, rebellious children imaginable.

Romans 5:8 “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (NASB)

Luke 11:9-13 “So I (*Jesus*) say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you... Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he?... how much more shall your heavenly Father give... to those who ask Him?” (NASB)

Luke 18:1-8 “Now He (*Jesus*) was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, saying, ‘In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, “Give me legal protection from my opponent.” For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, “Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.”’ And the Lord said, ‘Hear what the unrighteous judge said; now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?’ ” (NASB)

Romans 8:31,32 “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?” (NASB)

The reason it hurts when a child doubts a parent’s love is: It demonstrates the relationship is somehow flawed. It’s not what it’s supposed to be. There exists some kind of disconnect between the two that prevents both from fully benefiting from this special, unique relationship. A child has to trust the parent in order for the parent to be able to guide and help the child. The parent cannot enjoy the love of a child who will not trust.

It also demonstrates that the child does not truly know or understand the parent. This is particularly true in our relationship with our Heavenly Father. If we somehow doubt His love and devotion to us, then we don’t know or understand Him. If we did, we would be elated to trust Him with every facet of our lives, even unto death.

Jeremiah 9:23,24 “Thus says the LORD, ‘Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,’ declares the LORD.” (NASB)

John 16:2,3 “... an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God. These things they will do because they have not known the Father or Me (*Jesus*).” (NASB)

Jeremiah 4:22 “My people are fools; they do not know me. They are senseless children; they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil; they know not how to do good.” (NIV)

John 10:10-15 “... I (*Jesus*) came that they may have life, and have it abundantly... I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep.” (NASB)

Perhaps the worst thing from the parent's perspective is that when a child will not trust, then the child will not listen and heed; and if your child won't heed your word, then your ability to act on the child's behalf is severely limited. You can't do all you want to do for them, because, in their lack of faith, they are walking away from your will.

In the same way, God's ability to work in our lives is devastated by a lack of trust in Him. God fervently desires to act on our behalf and to do great and mighty things in our lives, but His ability to do so is directly related to how much we are willing to trust Him. He can't do all of the amazing things that can come from an almighty, all-knowing God if we refuse to trust Him when we don't get our way. God can't lead us down a road that would be extraordinary for us if we decline His hand. And so we totter off on our own, leaving God and His plan behind. God must then chase after us, like a parent after a three year old who is convinced he can cross a busy street during rush hour without being run over.

Proverbs 1:7-33 “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline... If you had responded to my rebuke, I would have poured out my heart to you and made my thoughts known to you. But since you rejected me when I called and no one gave heed when I stretched out my hand, since you ignored all my advice and would not accept my rebuke... Then they will call to me but I will not answer; they will look for me but will not find me. Since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the Lord, since they would not accept my advice and spurned my rebuke, they will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes. For the waywardness of the simple will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them; but whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease, without fear of harm.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Jeremiah 50:6-34 “My people have been lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray and caused them to roam on the mountains. They wandered over mountain and hill and forgot their own resting place... for they sinned against the LORD, their true pasture, the LORD, the hope of their fathers... but... I will forgive the remnant I spare... their Redeemer is strong; the LORD Almighty is his name. He will vigorously defend their cause so that he may bring rest to their land...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Hebrews 3:12,13 “See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.” (NIV)

Matthew 6:25-34 “... do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in

all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” (NIV)

Jeremiah 3:13-15 “Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the LORD your God... Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding.” (NASB)

1 Peter 2:24,25 “and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.” (NASB)

Most of the time, we are too limited in our unbelief to understand what a great loss this is, but God in His omniscience knows exactly what we are missing, and it grieves Him more than we will ever know. He died for us, yet we won’t live for Him. And this means the life He can give us is a mere shadow of what was intended.

Genesis 6:5,6 “The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.” (NIV – 9184 ed.)

Ezekiel 6:9 “... how I (*God*) have been grieved by their adulterous hearts, which have turned away from me...” (NIV)

Matthew 13:54-58 “Coming to his hometown, he (*Jesus*) began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. ‘Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?’ they asked. ‘Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?’ And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, ‘Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor.’ And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.” (NIV)

Matthew 23:37 “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I (*Jesus*) have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.” (NIV)

Now take a moment and try to imagine another thing: *What could God do with someone who trusted Him completely and consistently?* What could God do with a man or woman or boy or girl who chose to trust Him at every turn without imposing his or her own will on His perfect plan? Or succumbing to fear? Or giving in to temptation? Or just being plain ole lazy?

The answer is: Anything! There are absolutely no limits to what God can do with true servants whose only desire is to obey their master. God can send them anywhere to do anything, because their faith empowers them to accomplish any and every task, whether menial or exciting, easy or difficult.

Think of this again from the perspective of good parents. If parents know their child will trust and obey them, then there is no task or errand the parents cannot send the child to complete. The parents can trust the child to finish the task well, because the parents know the child will follow their instructions without getting sidetracked, lost, or led astray.

If the parents can't rely upon the child because they know the child is untrusting or rebellious, then the parents cannot use the child in their service. They can only continue to instruct the child and wait for the child to mature. The child must remain in the schoolhouse and kept on very short tether until the parents know the child has grown up enough to be allowed out on his or her own.

It's the same way with God. If we refuse to trust and obey Him, then there is very little we can do in His service. The grace God can bestow upon us is limited to those things that will reprove and instruct. That's not much fun for either God or us.

But when we chose to trust God, not just a little but completely, and not just every now and then but consistently, then God can send us far and wide to do literally anything in keeping with His purpose, and we will succeed without fail. And then things get very exciting for both God and us.

Mustard seeds (the potency of faith).

While God wants us to trust Him completely and consistently, He knows how frail we are and how rare that is. And so He comforts us with the knowledge that the faith He is looking for is not some gargantuan thing. It is a tiny thing that has the power to do mighty things.

Psalm 103:8-18 “The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love... he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children – with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.” (NIV)

Matthew 17:20,21 “... you have so little faith. Truly I (*Jesus*) tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.” (NIV)

The mustard seed is one of the smallest seeds on earth, only about two millimeters in diameter. Yet despite its size, it is remarkable for two things: The *power* and *dimension* of its growth. The shoot from a mustard seed is so powerful it has been known to crack through concrete, and the plant that grows from the seed can be as tall as a man and provide shelter to birds and animals.

Mark 4:30-32 “Again he (*Jesus*) said, ‘What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.’” (NIV)

The parables of the mustard seed teach us that *genuine faith is tremendously potent*. Even a tiny bit of true faith has the power to break through any obstacle, no matter how formidable, while the impact of that tiny seed of true faith will spread far and wide, providing blessing to all those within the wide dimension of its reach.

These parables also remind us that the faith we are called upon to have (essentially to trust God to keep His Word) is not some massive, complex thing that is difficult to understand or employ. It is a small, simple thing that in its purity is very straight forward yet extremely powerful. The analogy in these verses is to simplicity, purity, and potency.

What these verses are not saying is that it’s OK to trust God a little and doubt Him a lot. The faith God calls us to is not a relative thing. It’s an absolute thing. Either we trust Him or we don’t. There are not shades of true faith. Our faith must be genuine and real, but this simple, little thing is powerful and explosive.

James 1:2-8 “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.” (NIV)

Revelation 3:15,16 “I (*Jesus*) know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth.” (NIV)

We should also take a moment and note that our faithful requests must also be in keeping with God's will. When Jesus says in Matthew 17 that if you have faith as small as a mustard seed you can move mountains, He means it. Faith is that powerful. But how often is it in keeping with God's will for mountains to move?

Some have interpreted this passage and other verses to mean that if we believe in anything strongly enough, we will receive whatever we request. But that's not really what these verses are saying. They establish the power of faith, but not the parameters within which faithful requests operate. We have to read God's Word as a whole, and scripture clearly states that faith does not give us *carte blanche* to have whatever we want. Rather, we enjoy the privilege of making any and every request known to God with the confident assurance that nothing is impossible for Him to do on our behalf when our request is in line with His plan and purpose. And if our request is not in keeping with His will, then we have the assurance that God's plan is better than our plan, and He will work all things together for good.

1 John 5:14 "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us." (NIV)

Romans 8:28 "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." (NASB)

A shift in focus – From who we are to what is our purpose.

When we genuinely trust God and allow our faith in Him to express itself in our thoughts, words, and deeds, then the potency of this tiny little seed of faith is unleashed, and from it mighty things can come that no power on earth can hinder. Like the shoot of a mustard seed breaking through concrete and growing to become a beautiful plant disproportionately large as compared to its seed, so our simple choices to trust God have profound and far-reaching consequences that the fallen world is powerless to restrain.

God looks for faith like a mustard seed in the hearts of His children because He knows that armed with this there exists nothing on earth that can stop us from fulfilling His plan. No matter the errand, we will accomplish what God sets out for us to do.

That's spectacularly encouraging, and a good point from which to shift our focus in seeking to understand our identity from *who we are* to *what we are here to do*.

We have seen who we are. We are the workmanship of almighty God, crafted by a hand whose expertise is immeasurable, perfectly designed with the potential to accomplish what is truly divine. We are called to live out our lives as strangers in a fallen world, but enabled to do so in a way that allows us to appreciate life's beauty

and brave the world's adversity, with tender hearts and strong minds that together grant a balanced vision of the beauty and sadness within the world, which whets the edges of our souls to a razor's edge and directs us with a Christ-like motivation and resolve. And we are born into a living hope that overcomes every fear and changes everything (in a good way!) forever when with a faith unto death we learn to live in a manner that brings glory to God, light to the world, and Joy, Peace, and reward to us. We trust God no matter what, and God can then use us to accomplish anything.

So with this encouraging understanding of who we are and what, through faith, we are capable of, let's now look at what we are instructed to do; that is, what is our purpose.

We are: Created in Christ Jesus to do good works.

Ephesians 2:10 provides a very clear and simple description of who we are and what we are here to do. We are meticulously crafted by God almighty, and created in Christ Jesus to do good works.

Ephesians 2:10 “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

What does it mean to be created “in Christ Jesus?” It means a lot of things. To start with, it means we are created to be a part of the family of God, of which Christ is the head. After Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection, God placed all authority in the hands of His Son, and so Jesus is the head of the family of God, sometimes called the “body” of Christ. By being “in Christ Jesus,” we have a particular place in this family, or body, with all of the benefits of being a member.

Philippians 2:5-11 “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (NASB)

Matthew 28:18 “Then (following the resurrection) Jesus came to them (His disciples) and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.’ ” (NIV)

Colossians 1:15-20 “The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the

church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” (NIV)

Ephesians 1:3-23 “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ... he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ... to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ... I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.” (NIV)

Hebrews 2:11 “Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.” (NIV)

To be created “in Christ Jesus” also means to be created to be a part of what Jesus is doing on earth. Our place in the body comes with a unique purpose to fulfill on behalf of the family. As we have seen, we have a specific, vital role to fulfill that is an integral part of all God had planned to accomplish through His Son, and through the family of those who will choose to follow Him.

1 Corinthians 12:12-27 “Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ... the body is not made up of one part but of many. Now if the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’ On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices

**with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”
(NIV)**

“In Christ Jesus” is also a qualifier for what comes next in the verse: “To do good works...” A prideful heart can take the direction to “do good works” and use it as an excuse to do just about any horrible thing. But the qualifier of “in Christ Jesus” reminds us that our “good works” should be in keeping with who Jesus is and the example He set for our behavior.

John 16:2,3 “... an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God. These things they will do because they have not known the Father or Me (*Jesus*).” (NASB)

Jeremiah 4:22 “My people are fools; they do not know me. They are senseless children; they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil; they know not how to do good.” (NIV)

1 John 2:6 “Whoever claims to live in Him (*God*) must live as Jesus did.” (NIV)

What works are good?

We all think we inherently know what “good works” are, and it’s very easy to just jump right in and start “doing great things for the Lord” without first taking a moment to reflect on the scriptures and examine what God truly considers to be “good works” and what may actually be our own selfish desires expressing themselves behind a cloak of piety. Pride, self-righteousness, and our innate nature to sin can be very sneaky things that find subtle ways to worm their way into our thoughts, words, and deeds, and if we are not careful our “good works” can become expressions of great evil. We have to remember that our hearts can be deceitful and provide compelling excuses to do what is very wrong, especially when we can do what we want while wearing a protective mask of religious zeal.

Jeremiah 17:9 “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (NIV)

Proverbs 16:25 “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.” (NASB)

Proverbs 16:2 “All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, but the LORD weighs the motives.” (NASB)

1 Samuel 16:7 “... for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” (NASB)

Luke 16:15 “He (*Jesus*) said to them (*the Pharisees*), ‘You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God’s sight.’ ” (NIV)

Isaiah 29:13 “The Lord says: ‘These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.’ ” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Luke 18:9-14 “And He (*Jesus*) also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: ‘Two

men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: "God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get." But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.' " (NASB)

Matthew 6:1-6 "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you." (NASB)

Philippians 1:15-18 "It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so out of love... The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition... But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I (*Paul*) rejoice..." (NIV)

Matthew 23:1-24 "Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, saying: 'The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them. They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger... Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!' " (NASB)

2 Timothy 4:3,4 "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths." (NASB)

Colossians 2:20-23 "... why... do you submit yourself to decrees such as, 'Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!'... in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion... but are of no value..." (NASB)

Romans 16:17,18 "... watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own

appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.” (NIV)

Jeremiah 29:8,9 “Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,’ declares the LORD.” (NIV)

Romans 10:2,3 “... they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness.” (NIV)

Galatians 4:18 “It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good...” (NIV)

So let’s take a look at some verses describing what God considers to be good works and see what we can learn from them. A helpful place to start is with the fruit of the Holy Spirit we first looked at in Chapter 5. There can be no doubt that God is pleased with love, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Galatians 5:22,23 “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control; against such things there is no law.” (NASB)

1 Timothy 1:5 “But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” (NASB)

Ephesians 4:1,2 “... to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.” (NIV)

Proverbs 19:22 “What is desirable in a man is his kindness...” (NASB)

Titus 2:13,14 “... Jesus Christ... gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for Himself a people that are His very own, eager to do what is good.” (NIV)

Proverbs 12:22 “Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who deal faithfully are His delight.” (NASB)

2 Timothy 2:24-26 “The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses...” (NASB)

James 3:13-17 “Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom... the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.” (NASB)

2 Timothy 1:6,7 “... fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you... God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Ephesians 5:1-10 “Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved... Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord.” (NIV)

There are lots of other “good works” found in the Bible that are in some respects simply various expressions of the fruit of the Spirit. For example:

- Forgiving others.

Colossians 3:12,13 “... put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against any one; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.” (NASB)

Luke 6:35,36 “But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (NASB)

- Helping those in need.

Proverbs 14:21,31 “It is a sin to despise one’s neighbor, but blessed is the one who is kind to the needy... Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.” (NIV)

Proverbs 19:17 “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward them for what they have done.” (NIV)

James 1:27 “Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” (NASB)

- Encouraging one another.

1 Thessalonians 2:6-12 “... as apostles of Christ we... were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children... For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into His kingdom and glory.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Hebrews 10:24,25 “and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another...” (NASB)

1 Thessalonians 5:5-28 “You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled... since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that... we may live together with Him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up... Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in

Christ Jesus... Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil... May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and He will do it... The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

- Showing compassion and providing comfort.

Ephesians 4:31,32 “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 1:3-5 “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.” (NIV)

- Supporting the church financially.

1 Corinthians 16:1,2 “Now concerning the collection... each one of you is to put aside... as he may prosper...” (NASB)

- Obeying our nation’s just laws.

Titus 3:1-4 “Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every consideration for all men. For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us...” (NASB)

- Praying for one another.

Colossians 4:2,3 “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us (*Paul and his companions*), too...” (NIV)

James 5:16 “... pray for each other... The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” (NIV)

Philippians 4:6,7 “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (NASB)

- Worshiping with one another.

Ephesians 5:1-21 “Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved... among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because

these are improper for God's holy people... Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord... Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity... be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (NIV)

Hebrews 12:28 “... let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe,” (NIV)

- Sharing the Gospel.

Philemon 1:6 “... be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Romans 1:16 “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes...” (NIV)

- Teaching God's Word.

Colossians 3:12-17 “... put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another... Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another... Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.” (NASB)

Romans 12:6-18 “Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly... if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.” (NASB)

We could go on and on, but what's important to glean from these examples is a general feel for what works are “good” in God's sight. They are those works that mirror the works of God the Father and His Son, Jesus. Just as the Father and the Son are loving, patient, kind, and faithful, so should we behave in the world as

members of the same family. Jesus was forgiving, compassionate, and encouraging, and our works should be as well. This is how we demonstrate we are His followers.

1 Peter 2:17-23 “Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king. Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable. For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps... while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously;” (NASB)

Luke 6:31-38 “Treat others the same way you want them to treat you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners in order to receive back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned. Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure – pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return.” (NASB)

1 John 3:1-24 “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!... This is how we know who the children of God are... Anyone who does not do what is right is not God’s child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister. For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another... This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth... this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. The one who keeps God’s commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.” (NIV)

John 13:34,35 “A new command I (*Jesus*) give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (NIV)

Conspicuously absent: Political activism and the imposition of moral values.

Notice some of the “works” that are conspicuously absent from the verses we just considered. There is nothing in there about *political activism*. People didn’t necessarily vote like we do today during the time of Jesus, but still we find no call in the scriptures to change the way governments operate. And as much as we complain about government today, it was *much* worse in the time of Christ. Crack open your history books and read up on the administrations of Tiberius, Caligula, Antipas, and Agrippa, and compare their antics to our own politicians and decide for yourself when times were more perverse.

There is also no call for the *imposition of moral values* upon unbelievers. It’s just not there. There are certainly calls for the follows of Jesus to behave morally, but no instruction to go out and get those unbelievers to shape up.

1 Corinthians 5:9-13 “I (*Paul*) wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. ‘Expel the wicked person from among you.’ ” (NIV)

Although the political system of Jesus’ day was incredibly corrupt and depraved, Jesus never allowed Himself to be pulled into any political argument, nor did He allow Himself to become the poster child for any political cause (and there were many during the time of Christ). On the contrary, He clearly and firmly refused to have anything to do with politics.

Matthew 22:15-22 “Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. ‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?’ But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, ‘You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.’ They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, ‘Whose image is this? And whose inscription?’ ‘Caesar’s,’ they replied. Then he said to them, ‘So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.’ When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.” (NIV)

John 18:33-36 “Therefore Pilate entered again into the Praetorium, and summoned Jesus and said to Him, ‘Are You the King of the Jews?’... Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My

servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.’ ” (NASB)

Also, in the Gospels you don't see Jesus going around denouncing unbelievers for their wicked ways. He fiercely denounced the incredibly self-righteous, judgmental, and hypocritical religious establishment for their wicked ways, but not the lost, common man. On the contrary, He went out to both the common man and the most notorious sinners of the day (for example, the tax gatherers, who were basically organized crime leaders), befriended them, and shared His message of redemption and hope, without ever compromising His own sinless character.

Matthew 9:9-13 “As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. ‘Follow me,’ he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’ On hearing this, Jesus said, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.’ ” (NIV)

Matthew 21:28-32 “‘What do you (*the Chief Priests and elders*) think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, “Son, go and work today in the vineyard.” “I will not,” he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, “I will, sir,” but he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted?’ ‘The first,’ they answered. Jesus said to them, ‘I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.’ ” (NIV)

Matthew 23:1-33 “Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ‘The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called “Rabbi” by others. But you are not to be called “Rabbi,” for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth “father,” for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who

are trying to. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are. Woe to you, blind guides! You say, "If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath." You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, "If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath." You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Therefore, anyone who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And anyone who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And anyone who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, "If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets." So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started! You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" (NIV)

It's natural to want to go out and change the world and make it a better place. But Jesus' words and example teach us that political activism and the imposition of moral values upon unbelievers are emphatically not the way to do it. That's the way the fallen world makes changes when it gets the urge, through the electric prod of political agendas and the bludgeon of enforced morality. And when religious people pick up these weapons and give them a try in order to do "good works" for the Lord, we end up with horrific things like the "holy" crusades, inquisitions, and pogroms that have occurred throughout history and injured terribly the cause of Christ.

If political and moral agendas are not the way to bring about positive change in the world, what is the way?

Two specific commands: Live exemplary lives and share the good news.

Jesus did not tell us to go out and change the political landscape so the world can be a better place, nor did He command us to get out there and change the moral behavior of unbelievers. He did, however, give us two very specific commands that accomplish exactly the same things, only in much better and much more meaningful ways. We are commanded to: *Live exemplary lives* and *share the good news*.

Jesus commanded His followers to live exemplary lives. In a sense, this summarizes most of the “good works” we looked at earlier. Our lives should be living examples to the unbelieving world of the virtues of love, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, forgiveness, compassion, encouragement, generosity, etc. – all of the virtues described in the teachings of Christ and vividly illustrated by His life.

Titus 2:7,8 “In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.” (NIV)

1 Peter 2:12,15 “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God... For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.” (NIV)

We are commanded also to share the Gospel, literally the “good news,” with the lost and hurting world. For example: God is. God cares. He became a man, Jesus Christ, and showed us how to love God and love one another, and we crucified Him for it. But because of His great love for us, while He was on the cross He paid for the sins of everyone who has ever or who will ever live; and if we put our faith in Him our sins will be forgiven and we will be made righteous before God, not as a result of our own good works but as a result of His free gift. And if we will follow Jesus’ example and love as He did, through the light and power available to us from God’s Word and Spirit, we will discover and fulfill God’s wonderful and amazing plan for our lives and find the Joy and Peace for which we long. That’s just a smidgen of the “good news” and that’s pretty great!

Mark 16:15-19 “He (*Jesus*) said to them (*His disciples*), ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation...’ After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God.” (NIV)

Romans 10:15 “... As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’ ” (NIV)

And that’s exactly what we don’t do! Instead of leading exemplary lives and sharing the good news, all too often we run around leading self-righteous and judgmental lives and cramming our political and moral views down the throats of people who

despise us for our hypocrisy and arrogance. We rattle off a lot of holier-than-thou lingo and make darn sure we noisily share the bad news that unbelievers are going to hell, and then we try to tell people how to vote.

That is not what Jesus told us to do! Why? Lots of reasons. For starters, the only kind of person we will attract with that sort of shtick is someone who wants to join in the political and moral thuggery. It appeals to those with a taste for the control and coercion of others, and those impulses are completely foreign to the teachings of Christ. We are not here to control or coerce anyone. We are here to build them up and set them free.

1 Thessalonians 5:5-23 “You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness... Therefore encourage one another and build each other up... Live in peace with each other... encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus... hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil... May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (NIV)

Galatians 5:1-26 “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery... The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love... You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love... So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature... The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like... Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

John 8:31,32 “... Jesus said, ‘If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’ ” (NIV)

As we take the unbelieving world in a headlock and attempt to ram our political and moral views down their gagging esophagi, is there really any chance of leading them to Christ? Is there any chance that those humble but as yet unsaved souls who are watching our performance are thinking: Wow, those Christians are awesome! I want to be one of those?

Of course not! The lost are turning their backs on us in droves because so often our behavior is just as sickening as the other sources of tyranny and oppression in the world. It’s the same tactics, just with a very thin veneer of self-righteous justification.

Why did Jesus instruct us to live exemplary lives and share the good news? Let's begin with exemplary lives. When we are loving, patient, kind, faithful, gentle, self-controlled, generous, compassionate, caring, etc., we gain three very important things from the unbelieving world: *Respect, objectivity, and undivided attention.*

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12 "... you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other... Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands... so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders..." (NIV)

Proverbs 3:3,4 "Do not let kindness and truth leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. So you will find favor and good repute in the sight of God and man." (NASB)

We saw this earlier when we reviewed the fruit of the Spirit in Chapter 5. When we follow Jesus' example, we stand out from the fallen world as a light in the darkness. People want to know how we can be so loving and kind in this dreary place, and because our "good works" have earned their respect, objectivity, and undivided attention, it makes sharing the good news of Jesus easy for us to do, and easy for them to accept. It's easy to share a message of hope with someone who has seen that hope come dramatically alive in you, and it's easy for someone to receive and embrace that hope because they want what you have.

Philippians 2:14,15 "Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, 'children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.' Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky" (NIV)

Matthew 5:14-16 "You are the light of the world... Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." (NASB)

1 Peter 3:15,16 "But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander." (NIV)

Titus 2:10 "... in every way... make the teaching about God our Savior attractive." (NIV)

If we are self-righteous, judgmental jerks pedaling a political and/or moral agenda, it's just the opposite. Instead of respect, objectivity, and undivided attention, we gain three destructive things from the unbelieving world that devastate our calling: *Disrespect, subjectivity, and inattention.*

Romans 2:1-24 "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things... do you show contempt

for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?... You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: 'God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.' ” (NIV)

When we follow the world's example, and in our self-righteousness and judgment act out with the same hate and meanness that typifies the world in which we live, no one respects us. They view anything we say with a subjective, pre-indisposition to our message. And usually they won't give us the time of day.

Romans 14:13-19 “Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this – not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way... for the kingdom of God is... righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 9:12 “... we endure all things so that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ.” (NASB)

Leading exemplary lives pulls down the barriers to meaningful conversations with the lost, so their hearts are open to the message of Christ, and that is when we are called to share the *good news* that there is a risen Savior who forgives sin and leads us to the light of God – not the bad news, and certainly not our pet political cause or moral crusade.

We don't need to club people over the head with the bad news (such as, people are sinful and judgment awaits) because it's the Holy Spirit's job to convict people of their sin. He knows how to do that in just the right way and in just the right measure, so when the unbelieving person is exposed to the good news from a faithful follower of Christ, the choice before them is clear and there is no distraction (in the form of our bad behavior) for them to rely upon as an excuse to reject the free gift of salvation.

John 16:8 “And He (*the Holy Spirit*), when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment;” (NASB)

If we try to do the Holy Spirit's job for Him and attempt to convince the lost of how sinful they are and what torments await them, we appear like self-righteous, judgmental bullies and rarely get a chance to share the good news. And even when we do, our misbehavior provides the unbeliever with an easy pretext to sidestep the fundamental question of whether he or she needs a Savior.

While it's important and correct to mention the problem of sin as a part of a complete presentation of the Gospel message, we need to remember it's counterproductive to beat someone about the head and shoulders with it. Instead,

we should focus on the “good news” that the work of Christ on the cross solves the problem of sin, and through His grace we can be reconciled to God as a free and loving gift. Deep down inside, everyone knows they are sinful (even though they might not admit it to others), and they don’t need convincing. They need the light of the Gospel to lead them away from their sin and into a meaningful and fulfilling relationship with their Creator.

Psalm 36:1 “Transgression speaks to the ungodly within his heart...” (NASB)

Romans 1:18-20 “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 4:2-10 “... we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ... For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 3:3,18 “... you are a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts... And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord...” (NIV)

The Spirit of God has divine insight into the hearts of the lost that we are totally lacking. He will do the poking and prodding in the unbelieving heart until it is ready for the message of hope and reconciliation that is found in Christ alone, and then if we will simply be faithful in leading exemplary lives God can bring us into the life of the unbeliever at just the right time, in just the right place, and the unbeliever will be open and eager to hear the Gospel of Jesus from someone they respect and admire.

And then something amazing happens. As people put their faith in Jesus and start to follow Him, their morals change and they gain wisdom that spills over into every

aspect of their lives, including which buttons they push in a polling booth. They have been led to Christ, and as their relationship with Him grows in the light of God's Word and through the power of God's Spirit, their behavior changes for the better and they are able to make wiser choices. And this is not as a result of political or moral strong-arming, the effect of which is almost always erratic and temporary, but as the result of a deep, abiding change in their very being that is brought about through the combined awesome power of God's Son, Word, and Spirit.

2 Peter 1:2-10 "Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him... For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins... as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble;" (NASB)

Ephesians 3:14-21 "For this reason, I (*Paul*) bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen." (NASB)

As followers of Christ, our calling is not to tell people how to live or how to vote. Our calling is to introduce people to Christ, so He can change them from the inside out, and in their relationship with Him they can discover for themselves how they are to live their lives and contribute to society in a way that is in sync with God's plan and purpose. Then they in turn will lead exemplary lives and share the good news, and we will all fulfill our unique calling as members of the body of Christ.

Ephesians 4:1-13 "... live a life worthy of the calling you have received... equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and

**become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”
(NIV)**

Of course we all need to vote conscientiously, and it's fine to be active in politics if that is one's interest. In appropriate circumstances it's also correct to express (but not press) our moral views, as long as we are not self-righteous or judgmental about them. Indeed, this may be a part of taking a divinely appointed stand and speaking the truth in love. Just keep in mind that these things are not our *calling* as followers of Christ. They are not what we are supposed to focus on when we are holding ourselves out to the unbelieving world as Christians. We are not called to bring about a change in politics or in the morals of unbelievers. We are called to lead people to Christ, through the good example of our behavior and the transforming power of Jesus' message. Then Jesus will take care of the politics and morals.

Romans 12:1-18 “Therefore I (*Paul*) urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect... Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly... Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality... If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.” (NASB)

If we were to bring about every change we ever desired in government, and if we were able to alter every behavior of the unbelieving world to align with our own standards, from the divine perspective it would be *meaningless*, because that's not what God commanded us to do. He commanded us to lead the lost to His Son, so that through a relationship with Him meaningful change can come to individual lives and to the world. When we focus our time and energy on changing the politics and morals of the unbelieving, we abrogate our responsibilities to our true calling and utterly fail in carrying out the commission Jesus entrusted to us.

Colossians 2:2-23 “... be encouraged... attaining to all the wealth that comes from full assurance of understanding... so that no one may delude you with persuasive argument... See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ... Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize... why... do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, ‘Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!’... in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion... but are of no value...” (NASB)

Matthew 7:21-23 “Not everyone who says to me (*Jesus*), ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’ ” (NIV)

Perhaps one reason Christians get off track in this area is that in the “Great Commission” passage of Matthew 28:16-20, Jesus tells the disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

Matthew 28:16-20 “Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go... Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’ ” (NIV)

We see the phrases “go and make disciples” and “teach... them to obey everything I have commanded,” and if we have prideful hearts with a leaning towards bossing other people around, we take these words as a license to attempt to force people to become disciples or to intimidate people into obeying Jesus’ commands. Or at least to try to make people feel really inferior if they don’t do what we say.

But the spirit of the Great Commission, especially when read in harmony with the rest of scripture, is clearly not to force anything on anyone. Instead, it is to lead people to Christ through our good example and the power of Jesus’ message. Jesus did not force Himself on anyone, and He did not commission us to do so on His behalf. Jesus led an infinitely exemplary life, and He shared the good news perfectly, and we are called to follow His example to the best of our abilities.

Ephesians 5:2 “and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (NIV)

1 John 2:6 “Whoever claims to live in him (*Jesus*) must live as Jesus did.” (NIV)

At the end of the day, the only way to be a disciple of Jesus and to obey His commands is to receive Him as our Savior and make Him the Lord and Leader of our lives. That is the test of discipleship and the only means by which we ultimately find the strength to follow Jesus’ teachings (in the light of God’s Word and through the power of God’s Spirit). True morality and good citizenship are the *end results* of a *pre-existing* relationship with Christ that is genuine and alive, and so it is this *relationship* we are to lead people to through our good example and good news. When we focus on these end results and ignore the underlying means of knowing Christ, we fail to accomplish the Great Commission. We lead people to a lifestyle, but not to a Savior and Lord.

Isaiah 29:13 “The Lord says: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.’ ” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Beware of people or ministries who try to lure you into their cause if it is anything other than living exemplary lives and sharing the good news. Examine their tactics, and see if they are in keeping with the fruit of the Spirit and the example Jesus set. And don't let a desire to change the world for the better, no matter how fervent, cause you to become a part of what makes the world fallen in the first place.

James 3:13-17 “Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom... the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.” (NASB)

Titus 3:1-14 “Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone... stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone. But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless... Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order to... not live unproductive lives.” (NIV)

Titus 2:1-12 “You, however, must teach what is appropriate to sound doctrine. Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance. 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 urge the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind... so that no one will malign the word of God. Similarly, encourage the young men to be self-controlled. In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us... in every way... make the teaching about God our Savior attractive. For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. These, then, are the things you should teach...” (NIV)

And just as a quick reminder, notice another thing “good works” are not: A means to earn our salvation. As we saw in Chapter 3, good works are a means to express our appreciation for the saving work of Christ, and a means whereby we fulfill the plan of

God for our lives and thereby come to know Joy and Peace, but they are never enough to purchase our salvation. That price is too high for us, and was instead paid in full by the sinless Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Ephesians 2:8,9 “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (NASB)

Titus 3:5-7 “he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy... so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.” (NIV)

Romans 4:3-6 “For what does the Scripture say? ‘ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS’... the one who... believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:” (NASB)

Galatians 2:16,21 “know that a person is not justified by the works of the law (*the Jewish law, more strict than any moral code we have today*), but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified... I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” (NIV)

Romans 3:23 “for all... fall short of the glory of God,” (NASB)

Isaiah 64:6 “... all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment...” (NASB)

Psalms 76:4-7 “You are resplendent, more majestic than the mountains... You, even You, are to be feared; and who may stand in Your presence...?” (NASB)

Psalms 143:2 “And do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no man living is righteous.” (NASB)

Romans 5:8 “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (NASB)

Romans 3:10-22 “... There is no one righteous, not even one... All have turned away... Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe...” (NIV)

John 1:29-34 “The next day he (*John the Baptist*) saw Jesus coming to him and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!... I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God.’ ” (NASB)

1 Peter 1:18,19 “... you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold... but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.” (NASB)

Prepared in advance for us to do.

Ephesians 2:10 ends with a phrase that tells us something remarkable about what we are here to do. If you ever wondered whether God has a specific plan and vital purpose for your life, here is a verse that tells you unequivocally: He does!

Ephesians 2:10 “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

The good works God created for us to do were prepared by God in advance of our existence. This means that, not only are we God’s workmanship, meticulously crafted by the Creator of the universe and everything in it, but also we have a preordained purpose that complements our design. As God fashioned everything about us, He did so with attention to the plan He had prepared for our lives even before human history began, so who we are harmonizes with what we are here to do.

In Chapter 3 we touched on these ideas in the discussion of God’s omniscience and foreknowledge and the concepts of the divine decree, predestination, and election. Before the creation of the universe or any life, in His omniscience God considered every possible combination of creature and environment, along with how each individual being would exercise his or her free will, then decreed one divine plan for the ages that is consistent with His holiness and love and that also allows us to freely choose between right and wrong.

Isaiah 46:9-11 “... I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure’... I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it.” (NASB)

Psalms 148:5,6 “Let them praise the name of the LORD, for He commanded and they were created... He has made a decree which will not pass away.” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 2:7 “but we speak God’s wisdom... which God predestined before the ages to our glory;” (NASB)

Acts 2:23 “this Man (*Jesus*), delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God...” (NASB)

Isaiah 14:24-27 “The LORD Almighty has sworn, ‘Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will happen... This is the plan determined for the whole world; this is the hand stretched out over all nations. For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?’” (NIV)

Part of this divine plan is the “good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” In eternity past, as God chose to create you, He foresaw how you would exercise your free will. He then crafted both who you are and what you are here to do accordingly and in harmony with His overall plan for human history. In other words, as part of the process of planning out human history, God planned out *you* as a person and He planned out your specific *purpose* in His great design, all based upon the choices you would freely make and what He desired to accomplish in human history through you. He decided to give you both “life” and “a life;” that is, both existence and purpose, which together would be in keeping with both your choices

and His design. And He crafted your existence with divine workmanship so you would have everything you need to accomplish the specific good works that are yours to perform in His great plan.

Ephesians 1:4-14 “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace... we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will... you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance...” (NIV)

Jeremiah 29:11-13 “ ‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future... You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.’ ” (NIV)

Try to let these profound and extraordinarily encouraging truths sink in, and remember them when you feel without direction or worth.

1 Peter 1:1-17 “... To God’s elect, strangers in the world... Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power... In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy... Since you call on a Father who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

1 Peter 2:9-23 “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light... Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us... For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men... To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Matthew 10:29-31 “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Matthew 6:26-33 “Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?... So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (NIV)

God’s choices and provision, and our strengths and weaknesses.

It can be rather mind boggling to try to get our heads around these ideas, because we are trying to understand how God wields His infinite knowledge and power with finite minds. Yet when we take these ideas apart and look at them bit by bit, what we find is truly inspiring.

God *chose* to create you. It was a conscious and purposeful decision, not an accident, oversight, or fluke. Why? First and foremost because He loves you, and He wants to have a relationship with you that is more real, loving, and fulfilling than any father/child relationship on earth. And He wants you to experience the life He has prepared for you so that through this journey you can come to truly know Him and grow close to Him, so when you die and go to heaven to be with Him for all eternity, you do not go to meet a stranger.

Ephesians 1:4 “... He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world...” (NASB)

1 Peter 1:1,2 “... To God’s elect... who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father...” (NIV)

Psalms 91:1-16 “Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.’ Surely he will save you from the fowler’s snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked. If you say, ‘The LORD is my refuge,’ and you make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways... ‘Because he loves me,’ says the LORD, ‘I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver

him and honor him. With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation.’ ” (NIV)

Jeremiah 9:23,24 “Thus says the LORD, ‘Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,’ declares the LORD.” (NASB)

Isaiah 43:1-5 “But now, this is what the LORD says – he who created you... he who formed you... ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine... For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior... Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you... Do not be afraid, for I am with you...’ ” (NIV)

He also chose to create you and make you the way you are because He has something specific for you to do. He has a purpose for your individual life, for all of human history, and for the role you are called to play in the great drama of life. As a result, nothing about you is random or a mistake.

Romans 9:17 “For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH.’ ” (NASB)

Job 10:8-12 “Your (*God’s*) hands shaped me and made me... Remember that you molded me like clay... Did you not... knit me together with bones and sinews? You gave me life...” (NIV)

Psalms 139:1-16 “You have searched me, LORD, and you know me... For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made... your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.” (NIV)

This includes both your strengths *and* your weaknesses. God uses *both* to further His plan. It’s easier to understand how God uses our strengths. Whatever we are good at – whether we are smart, strong, charming, or talented – God expects us to use these things for His glory as part of His plan for our lives. That’s why He gave us these gifts in the first place, to employ them in His service.

2 Timothy 1:6-9 “... fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you... God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord... by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Ephesians 4:1-15 “... live a life worthy of the calling you have received... equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and

craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.” (NIV)

Romans 12:3-18 “For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly... if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.” (NASB)

But God is also especially good at using our weaknesses to do great things. In some ways, it’s easier for God to use our weaknesses, because then it is clear it is God working through us to accomplish something great, and equally clear it is not our own abilities that bring us success. If a strong person does something great, we take less notice, because that’s what we expect strong people to do. But if a weak person does something great, we want to know how, because there is no way they could have done it on their own. This draws our attention to God and brings light to the world, as we discover God revealing Himself and His perfect grace in the way He pours out His love to fragile people in need and accomplishes His purpose through them.

1 Peter 4:11 “... If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 4:4-10 “... the god of this world (*Satan*) has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God... For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 2:1-5 “... When I (*Paul*) came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power.” (NIV)

God also likes to work through our weaknesses because it forces us to depend upon Him, instead of relying upon our own strength. As we learn to depend on Him day by day, we draw near to Him and fall into step with His plan and purpose for our lives. We tend to hold much tighter to God’s hand when our weaknesses (rather than our strengths) are in the spotlight, and this squeeze of the divine hand is greatly pleasing to God and tremendously beneficial to us.

Proverbs 3:5,6 “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” (NIV)

Romans 8:26 “... the Spirit helps us in our weakness...” (NIV)

Hebrews 13:9 “... for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace...” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 11:1-30 “I (*Paul*) hope you will put up with me in a little foolishness... I have worked much harder (*than the false teachers among the Corinthians*), been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.” (NIV)

Isaiah 40:28-31 “Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” (NIV)

Psalms 89:15-17 “Blessed are those who have learned to... walk in the light of your presence, LORD. They rejoice in your name all day long; they celebrate your righteousness. For you are their glory and strength...” (NIV)

Isaiah 42:5,6 “This is what God the LORD says – the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it,

who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: ‘I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you... a light...’ ” (NIV)

God’s ways are not our ways, and His thoughts are not our thoughts. So often He chooses to do things exactly the opposite as we would. God used Abraham and Sarah, an elderly couple way beyond the age of fertility, to give birth to the Jewish people (Genesis 17-21). He used Gideon, a frightened, common man full of doubt, to lead a tiny force and destroy a massive invading army (Judges 6-8). He chose Moses, a guy “slow of speech and tongue,” to appear before the king of Egypt and lead the people of Israel out of slavery (Exodus 3 & 4). He chose David, a young, lowly shepherd with no military experience, to kill a giant and become Israel’s greatest king and military leader (1 Samuel 16-18). He chose Paul, the greatest persecutor of the early church, to write much of the New Testament (Acts 7-9, 26).

In these and many other stories in the Bible we see God using people with some sort of weakness to do great things you would never expect them to be able to do. This includes people with physical disadvantages (like the old age of Abraham and Sarah or the speech problems of Moses) and social disadvantages (like the inexperience and low station of Gideon and David). It also includes people with terrible mistakes and failures in their past (like the great persecutor Saul who became the great apostle Paul).

What truly distinguishes these people are not their strengths, weaknesses, successes, or failures. It’s their faithfulness. That’s what made a difference in their lives. They chose to trust God, despite their weaknesses or shortcomings, and because of their faith, God was able to use them mightily in His plan.

Galatians 5:6 “... The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” (NIV)

Nothing is wasted with God. Nothing is without purpose. This means He can use every conceivable manifestation of both our strengths and our weaknesses to do great things, if with a faith unto death we will trust Him no matter what. So don’t be ashamed of your weaknesses! They may be extremely important and useful to God in fulfilling your destiny.

2 Corinthians 12:5-10 “... I will not boast about myself (*Paul*), except about my weaknesses... to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in

hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (NIV)

In eternity past, God examined carefully the choices we would make to trust or reject Him, and at the same time made innumerable choices of His own, electing to weave each of us into the timeline of human history in just the right place at just the right moment, with exactly the right qualities of body, mind, and spirit to accomplish the good works He envisioned for us to do as His workmanship. Who we are was precisely crafted and what we are here to do was delicately laced into the fabric of human history with purpose and intent, so our path contributes powerfully to the beauty of the overall design.

In addition to this, there is also another element to this divine planning that is very important for us to note. God designed you. God designed what you are here to do. And nobody wants you to fulfill His purpose more than He does. Therefore, in creating His great plan *God also included everything you need* to accomplish it.

Before human history began, God looked through the corridors of time. He foresaw your every need, given how you were to be made, when and where you would live, and what He wanted you to do. Then He made sure to provide every conceivable thing you would need to do His will.

Acts 17:26 “From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.” (NIV)

Matthew 6:25-34 “... do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” (NIV)

Philippians 4:19 “... God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” (NASB)

Notice God will provide everything you “need.” Not everything you “want.” If left up to us, we would requisition a luxury liner to cross a koi pond. But that’s not what

we need to make the trip, and overkill is rarely glorifying to God. What is glorifying to God is when we trust Him to provide whatever is truly necessary to accomplish His will, believing that God's grace will be sufficient no matter what we are called to do.

Hebrews 13:5,6 “Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, ‘I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER FORSAKE YOU,’ so that we confidently say, ‘THE LORD IS MY HELPER, I WILL NOT BE AFRAID. WHAT WILL MAN DO TO ME?’ ” (NASB)

Philippians 4:11-20 “I (*Paul*) have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me... And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen.” (NASB)

2 Thessalonians 3:16 “Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance. The Lord be with you all!” (NASB)

Because God knows all and has a purpose in everything, He can anticipate our needs and make perfect provision. God is never surprised or caught off guard in times of emergency. He planned our salvation and formed our escape route before time began. And we will find it, if we will trust Him to lead us to it.

Matthew 6:8 “... your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.” (NASB)

Isaiah 58:11 “and the LORD will continually guide you, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, and give strength to your bones; and you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 9:8 “And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.” (NIV)

Hebrews 4:16 “Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (NASB)

As we begin to take all of this in, we start to appreciate both God's *infinite insight into the details* and God's *infinite perspective of the whole* regarding who we are and what we are here to do. He understands us, intimately and entirely, because we are His very workmanship. He understands our purpose, wholly and unconditionally, because He prepared it in advance together with His plan for all humanity. And because He made us, designed our purpose, and infinitely desires for us to accomplish it, His provision for us is detailed and complete, standing by just waiting to be claimed.

That is tremendously encouraging, which is good, because guess what? No matter who you are or what God has prepared for you to do, at times you are going to fail.

At times – You will fail.

God poured His workmanship into you. He prepared “good works” for you to do before time began. And He made sure to provide you with everything you need to accomplish His will.

But into this empowering mix of divine ingredients tumbles our own free will, and just because God does all of these extraordinary things on our behalf does not necessarily mean we will benefit from them. God’s grace and mankind’s free will are the two mighty themes that play throughout human history, and if we wish to reject God’s purpose and provision, we are entirely free to do so.

Deuteronomy 30:19,20 “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the LORD your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days...” (NASB)

Jeremiah 7:24-28 “But they did not listen to me (*God*) or pay attention. They were stiff-necked and did more evil than their ancestors... they will not listen... when you call to them, they will not answer... Truth has perished; it has vanished from their lips.” (NIV)

We looked at this in Chapter 6, where we saw that even though God has a destiny planned out for each of us, we are free to abandon it. God intends absolutely nothing but the best for us. He became a man and paid the penalty for our sin, so it’s exceedingly clear He loves us. But He does not force His love upon us, and as a result we are free to reject His purpose for our lives and instead pursue our own.

Joshua 24:14,15 “... serve him with all faithfulness... But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...” (NIV)

1 Chronicles 28:9 “... serve Him with a whole heart and a willing mind; for the LORD searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will reject you...” (NASB)

Luke 7:29,30 “And when all the people and the tax collectors heard this, they acknowledged God’s justice... But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God’s purpose for themselves...” (NASB)

Ephesians 4:18,19 “They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Romans 1:21-32 “... although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools...”

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts... They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator... Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts... Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them." (NIV)

Another element to consider in all of this is that, even if we do our best to discover and fulfill God's plan for our lives and set aside our selfish and prideful desires, we are still going to sin and fail from time to time, because that is the human condition. At our very best we remain tremendously fragile and wayward creatures, prone to both make mistakes and intentionally rebel.

Isaiah 53:6 "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way..." (NIV)

Ephesians 2:3-5 "... we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)," (NASB)

Psalms 103:11-18 "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children – with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts." (NIV)

In Chapter 3 we noted that one of the most encouraging things we learn from the stories of the great men and women in the Bible is that they were just like us. They made really stupid mistakes and also committed serious intentional wrongs. Other than Jesus, no one is perfect. Everyone fails at times, even the true heroes and heroines of the past.

1 John 1:8 "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us." (NASB)

1 Kings 8:46 “... for there is no one who does not sin...” (NIV)

Ecclesiastes 7:20 “Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins.” (NASB)

Romans 3:23 “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” (NIV)

And a number of these failures were no small matter but rather some of the worst sins imaginable. Abraham committed adultery (Genesis 16). Moses committed murder (Exodus 2). David committed adultery and murder (2 Samuel 11). In Jesus’ hour of greatest need, Peter denied ever knowing Him three times, just a few short hours after swearing he would never forsake Him (Matthew 26). Paul persecuted, imprisoned, and even gave approval to the murder of the followers of Christ (Acts 8, 9 & 26).

Yet despite these terrible failures, these were some of the greatest men in history. The Bible states God used to speak to Moses “just as a man speaks to his friend” (Exodus 33:11), and David was “a man after (God’s) own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22). How could God treat these men so after such failures?

The key, as we have seen, is that they ran *to* God after failure, not *away* from Him. They sought and received God’s forgiveness (along with divine discipline as was appropriate) and moved forward after their sins and returned to God’s plan for their lives. They didn’t allow their failures to destroy their trust in God. They chose instead to humbly trust Him more than ever.

James 4:6 “... GOD... GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE.” (NASB)

Hebrews 12:1-13 “... let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith... FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES... God deals with you as with sons; for what son is their whom his father does not discipline?... All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.” (NASB)

Philippians 3:13,14 “... forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 7:10,11 “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done...” (NIV)

Isaiah 44:22 “I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you.” (NIV)

If we want to know Joy and Peace in a fallen world, we must learn this skill of running to God after failure, instead of away from Him. We can't get caught in a mire of untruth, thinking God could never forgive us for what we have done or use us again after great failures. The world operates that way, but God doesn't. With Him, we are never too sinful and never too late to be forgiven and renewed, when we return to Him with a humble heart.

Ezekiel 18:21-32 “But if a wicked person turns away from all the sins they have committed... None of the offenses they have committed will be remembered against them... Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?... Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ Hear, you Israelites: Is my way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust?... I will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit... For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!” (NIV)

Isaiah 55:6-9 “Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. ‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the LORD. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’” (NIV)

Isaiah 57:15,16 “For this is what the high and exalted One says – he who lives forever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. I will not accuse them forever, nor will I always be angry, for then they would faint away because of me – the very people I have created.’” (NIV)

God has had to forgive His greatest servants for tremendous sins in order to allow them to move forward and accomplish His will, and He will do the same for us! In fact, He will do so gladly and unreservedly when we humbly seek His forgiveness, because He loves us more than we will ever be able to comprehend. We note this, not to belittle the grievous sins committed by people like Moses or David (or you or me), and not to gloss over the tremendously hurtful consequences of these devastating sins, but rather to try to catch a glimpse of how genuinely amazing is the grace of our holy, loving Heavenly Father, who delights to pardon and mend every repentant heart.

Micah 7:18,19 “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression... You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.” (NIV)

Psalm 25:6-11 “Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love... Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me... All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful... For the sake of your name, LORD, forgive my iniquity, though it is great.” (NIV)

Isaiah 1:18-20 “... ‘Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool. If you consent and obey’... Truly, the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (NASB)

2 Peter 3:9 “The Lord is... patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.” (NASB)

Luke 15:7 “I (*Jesus*) tell you that... there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.” (NIV)

Jude 1:24,25 “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.” (NASB)

So if you fail, don't freak out! You are in good company. Every other man, woman, boy, and girl who has ever tried to follow Jesus into God's light has at times failed as well, even the greatest figures in human history. Instead, get down on your knees, confess your sin to God, and then praise and worship Him for all you are worth! You are forgiven. You are loved. And you are still useful to your Heavenly Father in His remarkable plan.

Lamentations 3:31-42 “For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone... Why should the living complain when punished for their sins? Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD. Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven, and say: ‘We have sinned and rebelled...’ ” (NIV)

1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (NASB)

Psalm 32:5 “I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD’; and You forgave the guilt of my sin.” (NASB)

Jeremiah 3:13-15 “Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the LORD your God... Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding.” (NASB)

Lamentations 3:21-25 “This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. The LORD's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. ‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I have hope in Him.’ The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him.” (NASB)

Psalm 145:8-16 “The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made... The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does. The LORD

upholds all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down... You (*God*) open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.” (NIV)

Psalm 130:7 “... put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love...” (NIV)

2 Timothy 2:21 “Those who cleanse themselves... will be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.” (NIV)

Jeremiah 15:19 “... If you repent, I (*God*) will restore you that you may serve me...” (NIV)

God is always standing by to forgive and renew, but as we have seen, His grace is not a license to sin. It is a license to serve. It allows us to deal with the residue of sin that plagues human nature, so we can fulfill our divine purpose despite the limitations of what God’s Word sometimes calls the “flesh;” that is, the nature to sin that is unfortunately a part of our physical existence in this fallen world.

Romans 8:4 “... do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” (NASB)

Galatians 5:16-24 “So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want... The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control... Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” (NIV)

Mark 14:38 “Keep watching and praying that you may not come into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (NASB)

2 Peter 2:9-22 “then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority. Daring, self-willed... like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge... suffering wrong as the wages of doing wrong. They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are stains and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, as they carouse with you, having eyes full of adultery that never cease from sin, enticing unstable souls, having a heart trained in greed, accursed children; forsaking the right way, they have gone astray... For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved. For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has

become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, 'A DOG RETURNS TO ITS OWN VOMIT,' and, 'A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire.' ” (NASB)

Ephesians 2:3-5 “... we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),” (NASB)

Romans 6:11-14 “... count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus... do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires... rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. For sin shall no longer be your master...” (NIV)

God will eventually discipline us for unrepentant sins and for sinful habits, so we must learn to both avoid these failures and break the routines that lead to them. How can we keep our failures to a minimum and order our lives in a way that prevents failure from becoming habitual?

Relying day by day on the manna of God.

Earlier in this study we looked at how to overcome temptation and how to set aside the grievances we sometimes have with God that lead to sinful habits in our lives. In addition to these principles, there is another tremendously helpful guide in learning to consistently live a life that is glorifying to God, and it's found in a familiar story from the Old Testament.

After hundreds of years in slavery, Moses led the Jewish people out of the bondage of Egypt on a march to the promised land of Canaan. At the outset of this journey, God did many miraculous things. He sent ten plagues to convince Pharaoh to release the slaves that fueled the economic engine of Egypt. He parted the Red Sea. And He directed the march with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Exodus 7-15.

Yet despite these miracles, the people of Israel refused to trust God. They constantly complained about the difficulty and uncertainty of their journey. They longed to go back to Egypt. They even built a golden idol shaped like a calf, worshiped it as their god, and gave it credit for leading them out of slavery. Exodus 16-34.

At first blush, this story often seems very foreign to us. We can't relate to why the people of Israel would be so untrusting, and we are sure if we had been a part of that generation, we would have been different. We would never be like that.

But we are exactly like that! We look ahead at the journey before us, which will take us from the slavery of ignorance and sin to the Promised Land of a holy life that is pleasing to God, and we complain about its difficulty and uncertainty all the time. We become fearful and untrusting, and many times we long to go back to the lifestyle that did not demand so much from us. And every time we focus on fame or fortune (or any of the trappings that go along with them), or alcohol, drugs, sex, etc., we set up idols just as false as the golden calf of the Israelites and worship them as the things that will bring us Joy and Peace.

The entire story of the journey of the people of Israel from the bondage of slavery to the land of promise serves as an incredibly revealing metaphor for the journey each of us takes from the darkness of sin to the light of God's grace. The story sheds enormous light on our own struggles, and we can learn much of how God will treat us as individuals from how He treated this generation.

One of the things God did to provide for the Israelites and teach them to trust Him was to feed them every day with "manna." Manna was a thin, flakey substance that miraculously appeared on the ground outside the camp early each day with the morning dew. It was "white like coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey" and could be used to make bread. The Israelites were commanded to go out each morning and gather enough manna for one day only, except on the sixth day when they were to collect enough for two days, so they wouldn't have to go out and gather anything on the Sabbath. By mid-morning, when the sun grew hot, any manna that remained melted away. Exodus 16.

Now an interesting thing about manna was that if you tried to gather more than one day's supply (except on the day before the Sabbath) and keep it overnight so you wouldn't have to go out and get your manna the next day, the following morning it was "full of maggots and began to smell." Exodus 16:20. You could gather and eat as much as you wanted, but if you tried to stock up and keep it overnight, it became inedible. It transformed from something mouthwatering to something repulsive.

The point God was trying to make to the Israelites is pretty clear: Depend on Me day by day. Don't try to build up a big stockpile and depend on that instead of Me. Then there would be a distance between us. You would only seek Me every once and a while when your stash dried up. I want us interacting every day, not now and then. This will keep us close, with your eyes on Me, and prevent you from wandering away on your own.

God used His miraculous provision of food for the Israelites to teach them to rely upon Him day by day. He wanted them to learn to approach their spiritual needs the way they approached their physical needs, with a daily trip to Him to be fed. The double dose provided the day before the Sabbath was a way of reinforcing that God

has everything under control. He built in a day of rest, because all of His work in providing for their needs was complete.

And as the weeks and months and years went by, and every day there was more than enough manna for all, the people were supposed to come to learn that God is faithful. We can trust Him. We don't have to worry about whether God is going to provide for all of our needs stretching out to some indefinite point in the future. He's providing for today and that's enough, because we have His promise He will take care of tomorrow. We don't need an actual, physical stockpile of supplies to give us the confidence we will be all right years from now. We have His Word to rely upon for that, and His Word is better than any pile of goodies.

Unfortunately, the Exodus generation never learned this lesson. They grumbled and moaned for forty years, right into their graves, as God waited for all of them to die (except for Joshua and Caleb, who were faithful to God) before He brought a new generation into the Promised Land. The Exodus generation never learned the lesson, so they never received the blessing. They chose instead to wallow in fear and disbelief until death took their miserable but well-fed bodies into the grave.

Numbers 32:10-13 “The LORD’s anger was aroused that day and he swore this oath: ‘Because they have not followed me wholeheartedly, not one of those who were twenty years old or more when they came up out of Egypt will see the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – not one except Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite and Joshua son of Nun, for they followed the LORD wholeheartedly.’ The LORD’s anger burned against Israel and he made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until the whole generation of those who had done evil in his sight was gone.” (NIV)

The Promised Land of Canaan was actually not that far from Egypt. It wouldn't have taken the Israelites very long to get there on a straight march. But because of their constant defiance of God and arrogant refusal to trust Him, they wandered around in a desert until they all dropped dead. What a tremendous loss!

Proverbs 1:7-33 “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline... If you had responded to my rebuke, I would have poured out my heart to you and made my thoughts known to you. But since you rejected me when I called and no one gave heed when I stretched out my hand, since you ignored all my advice and would not accept my rebuke... Then they will call to me but I will not answer; they will look for me but will not find me. Since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the Lord, since they would not accept my advice and spurned my rebuke, they will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes. For the waywardness of the simple will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them; but whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease, without fear of harm.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Jeremiah 50:6-34 “My people have been lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray and caused them to roam on the mountains. They wandered over mountain and hill and forgot their own resting place... for they sinned against the LORD, their true pasture, the LORD, the hope of their fathers... but... I will forgive the remnant I spare... their Redeemer is strong; the LORD Almighty is his name. He will vigorously defend their cause so that he may bring rest to their land...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

We can't let that happen to us! We have to learn this lesson well, so we don't wander around in our own self-made deserts and never discover the blessings God has promised for us. The blessings God has for you are not far away. It would take God all of about one millisecond to bring them to you through His omnipotent power. He's just waiting for you to learn to trust and obey Him.

Acts 17:26-28 “and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth... that they would seek God... and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist...” (NASB)

Jeremiah 3:13-15 “Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the LORD your God... Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding.” (NASB)

Psalms 37:3-40 “Trust in the LORD and do good... Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He will do it. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light... Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him... the humble will... delight themselves in abundant prosperity... the LORD sustains the righteous. The LORD knows the days of the blameless, and their inheritance will be forever... Wait for the LORD and keep His way, and He will exalt you... the salvation of the righteous is from the LORD; He is their strength in time of trouble. The LORD helps them and delivers them; He delivers them from the wicked and saves them, because they take refuge in Him.” (NASB)

Psalms 145:8-21 “The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made... The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does. The LORD upholds all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down... You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing... The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them. The LORD watches over all who love him... My mouth will speak in praise of the LORD. Let every creature praise his holy name for ever and ever.” (NIV)

In the story of the manna of God, we discover a key to learning to trust and obey our Heavenly Father: *Take your walk with God one day at a time.* Don't try to summon up or call down all the courage and strength you'll ever need to step out into this insane, fallen world with the faith to last a lifetime. God doesn't work that way. He doesn't impart all the grace we need to last a lifetime at some blessed moment and then with

a waive of the hand say “see ya later!” He doles out His grace the same way He supplies manna – all you could ever need for just one day.

If God gave us all the grace we would ever need, we would never see Him again. Not because He wouldn't be there, but because we would then forsake Him. That's what happened to the Israelites. They finally got to the Promised Land “flowing with milk and honey,” where they didn't need to depend upon God any more for their daily bread, and within a generation they turned their backs on Him and wallowed in the plentiful bounty of the land, and also in their sins. They saw they didn't have to rely upon God for their daily needs any longer because it was growing out of every field, tree, and vine, so they just drifted off on their own, away from the One who had so abundantly blessed them, and into idolatry and sin. They did it, and so would we. Judges 2.

But when we learn to trust God one day at a time – with a focus towards living each individual day well through the daily grace God abundantly supplies – then all sorts of amazing things start to happen.

To begin with, *we fall into step side-by-side with God*. We don't get ahead of Him, and we don't lag behind Him. We're at His hip, holding His hand, right where He wants us to be in His plan. We lift our eyes and God is there, not way ahead of us as we try to catch up to Him, and not way behind as we look back to see if God is following our own self-chosen path. He's right where He's supposed to be, looking down at a faithful child walking humbly at His side, and His face is shining.

Micah 6:8 “... what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (NIV)

Proverbs 30:7-9 “Two things I ask of you, LORD; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ ” (NIV)

Proverbs 3:13-26 “Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed... My son, do not let wisdom and understanding out of your sight, preserve sound judgment and discretion; they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck. Then you will go on your way in safety, and your foot will not stumble. When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, for the LORD will be at your side and will keep your foot from being snared.” (NIV)

Psalm 89:15-17 “Blessed are those who have learned to... walk in the light of your presence, LORD. They rejoice in your name all day long; they celebrate your righteousness. For you are their glory and strength...” (NIV)

Isaiah 42:5,6 “This is what God the LORD says – the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: ‘I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you... a light...’ ” (NIV)

Psalm 73:21-26 “When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” (NIV)

Psalm 31:14-16 “But as for me, I trust in You, O Lord, I say, ‘You are my God.’ My times are in Your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and from those who persecute me. Make Your face to shine upon Your servant...” (NASB)

Psalm 119:1-135 “How blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord. How blessed are those who observe His testimonies, who seek Him with all their heart. They also do no unrighteousness; they walk in His ways... With all my heart I have sought You; do not let me wander from Your commandments. Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You... Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path... The unfolding of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple... Turn to me and be gracious to me, after Your manner with those who love Your name. Establish my footsteps in Your word, and do not let any iniquity have dominion over me. Redeem me from the oppression of man, that I may keep Your precepts. Make Your face shine upon Your servant...” (NASB)

Numbers 6:24-26 “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine on you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance on you, and give you peace.” (NASB)

That’s an amazing place to be! Because when we are neither behind nor in front of God, but right there by His side, we allow our Heavenly Father to reach down and heal three destructive plagues that afflict nearly all of mankind.

Healing three plagues – Regret for the past, fear of the future, and daily addictions (the art of living today well).

As we grow older and experience both isolated and repeat failures in our lives, we often become plagued by three very harmful things: Regret for the past, fear of the future, and daily addictions. These afflictions grow in the leaf mold of our failures, and if they are not quickly identified and treated, they fester at an alarming rate. Each have the ability to attack our spiritual lives in very different but equally devastating

ways, and the only way to heal them is with a daily dose of “manna;” that is, a daily reliance upon the grace of God.

This means we tackle the journey of life one day at a time. And that day is *today*. Not yesterday. Not tomorrow. Today.

Hebrews 3:12,13 “See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” (NIV)

Hebrews 4:7 “... just as has been said before, ‘TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS.’ ” (NASB)

Matthew 6:25-34 “... do not be worried about your life... But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself...” (NASB)

God wants us to wake up each morning with a confident assurance that no matter what the day brings, whether it’s all sunshine or all rain, God’s grace will be there and it will be sufficient. Just like the Israelites woke up each morning and found all the manna they could ever want for the day already waiting for them, each day we have to decide to trust that God is going to provide us with all the grace we could ever need for that particular day.

What God doesn’t want us to do is wake up each morning fixated upon something that occurred in the past. He also doesn’t want us worried about something that might occur in the future. And He doesn’t want us planning on doing something wrong today. Each of these destructive habits prevent today from becoming a day wherein we can draw closer to God, come to know His Joy and Peace, and serve Him.

We need to learn to receive the gift of life as it is given – one day at a time. We have to master the art of living today well, in a manner that is glorifying to God. And with this art we must learn to deal with the things in the past, present, and future that keep us from discovering and fulfilling God’s plan and purpose for our lives. But how?

Let’s begin with *the art of living today well*. As finite creatures with limits to what our minds, bodies, and spirits can handle at any given moment, the journey of our lives can sometimes become overwhelming. The disappointments, temptations, and fears of the past, present, and future are often too much for us to handle given the fragility of the human condition and the harshness of this fallen world. You might think you are a tough guy and can handle anything, but you can’t. If you haven’t figured that out, just give it time. You will.

God has certainly figured that out, and so He doesn’t expect or even want us to try and take on all of these burdens at once. Instead, He wants us to *focus on making good*

decisions today; that is, from the moment we wake up until the moment we fall asleep. He wants us to concentrate our efforts to follow His Son's example on what happens between these two markers.

Don't fixate on things from the past you can't change, and don't fret about things in the future you can't control. The decisions made in our past cannot be altered, and the decisions to be made in our future cannot be foretold. So it's a waste of time worrying about either one! Why agonize over things that cannot be relived or that may never be? It's *today's* decisions that matter, and so we should focus on meeting *today's* challenges with choices that will please God, based upon our knowledge of God's Word and the guidance of God's Spirit. And as we learn to do this, slowly but surely the problems associated with our past, present, and future will lose their hold over us.

Philippians 4:4-20 "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!... Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me (*Paul*), practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you... for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me... And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen." (NASB)

1 Peter 5:6,7 "Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you." (NIV)

Now let's consider *regret for the past*. Not only do all of us fail, but all of us also fail spectacularly. It doesn't matter who you are, either you have or you will experience tremendous failure in your life. Failure is an unwelcome visitor that arrives at everyone's doorstep sooner or later. The bell rings. We open the door with big, friendly smiles on our faces. And an avalanche of failure comes crashing down upon us.

Later, after we dig ourselves out of the rubble, if we are not careful these failures can become obsessions in our lives. We sit around brooding about mistakes we made somewhere in our past that really tore us up, or continue to fill us with shame, or terribly hurt someone we love, and we allow these things to haunt us like ghosts. We

become fixated on the apparitions of the past, and lose touch with the reality of the present and the hope for the future.

But as we learn to live today well, our focus on making good decisions today redirects our thoughts from the past to the present. It grabs us by the ears and forcibly turns our heads, from a frozen gaze backwards at the things in the past we cannot change, to a forward facing posture that allows us to experience and engage with the present. It rends our eyes from the paralyzing stare of the ghosts of the past and points them towards the living.

Then as we wake up from the dream-like slumber of a defeated man or woman held down by their past, we can rise up and begin to live again. We see the great drama of life unfolding around us, and a desire to assume our part within it awakens. And if the good decisions of this new day begin with a review of all the promises in God's Word relating to His love for us, His ability and desire to forgive and renew, and His plan that assures us of a hope and a future (to name just a few), we can shake off the arthritic effects of regret and take hold of today with a firm, confident grip.

Philippians 3:12-14 “... I (*Paul*) press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus... one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (NASB)

Hebrews 12:1-13 “... let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith... strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.” (NASB)

And as we begin to practice the art of living today well – learning to focus our energies on handling the things we encounter each day as true followers of Christ – legitimate things from our past may surface; that is, not those things we cannot change, but rather those things we may have an opportunity to redress.

Knowing the difference can be tricky. We have to consider the thing in the light of God's Word with a prayerful reliance upon the guidance of God's Spirit. But if our hearts are humble and truly seeking God's will, it will be revealed (as we saw earlier in Chapter 6). And if we discover there is something we should do to redress a problem in our past in a way that is glorifying to God, we will find the wisdom and strength to do so. Or if there is something that needs to be left in the past, God's Word and Spirit will help us pull out a shovel and give it a proper burial, where it can turn to dust and haunt us no more.

Matthew 5:23,24 “Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering

there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.” (NASB)

Romans 6:4-23 “We were therefore buried with him (*Jesus*) through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life... For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – because anyone who has died has been set free from sin... In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus... offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace... You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness... What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NIV)

Micah 7:18,19 “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression... You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.” (NIV)

Hebrews 10:22 “let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience...” (NIV)

With the issues from our past either redressed or laid to rest, we are now facing in the right direction. We no longer sit lethargically down in the middle of life’s road and gaze woefully back at the path we have travelled, full of a debilitating regret that prevents us from moving forward with a spring in our step and a light in our eyes. We are standing up, straight and tall, facing forward. But what do we see?

This is where *fear of the future* can stop us in our tracks. We lift our foot to move forward, but our eyes lock onto the horizon and we can’t quite make out what’s there. So we set our foot right back down exactly where it was and spend ages speculating on what might be out there in the distance. We squint our eyes and crane our necks, and all too often we imagine the worst.

And so we never move forward. We are just as paralyzed as when the past wrapped itself around us and dragged us into the dust; and we are equally oblivious of the present. We completely miss out on all that is going on around us, both for our benefit and towards our destruction, and never make the choices today that can improve our lives.

Fear of the future is in a sense the opposite of regret for the past. In the past we see ghosts of things long dead. In the future we see monsters that are yet to be. Instead

of fixating on things we can't change, we become frightened of things that are merely speculation. Regret holds us back. It pulls at us from behind. Fear opposes our progress. It repels us from ahead. Both are empty phantoms we must learn to choose not to empower.

Matthew 6:25-34 “... do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” (NIV)

When we focus on living today well, the lock of our gaze on the horizon is broken, and instead of looking way far ahead and trying to figure out what we are seeing, we limit our gaze to what is plainly in our sight. Each day we concentrate on the obstacles and opportunities within our field of vision and meet them with the faith, hope, and love that come with a humble dependence upon our Heavenly Father. Then as a new day dawns and we are a little further down life's road and new things come into view, we engage them with these same virtues.

Psalm 5:2-12 “Hear my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray... in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly... Lead me, LORD, in your righteousness... make your way straight before me... let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in you. Surely, LORD, you bless the righteous; you surround them with your favor as with a shield.” (NIV)

Lamentations 3:21-25 “This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. The LORD'S lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. ‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I have hope in Him.’ The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him.” (NASB)

And as we begin to live today well, making good choices as they are presented to us day by day, we may indeed be presented with opportunities to sensibly plan for the future. This is another part of living today well. Of course we are to plan effectively

for the challenges of tomorrow. We are simply not to fear them, and thereby allow them to rob us of the Joy and Peace God wants us to know today. Just as we may have legitimate opportunities to redress things from the past, we will also have equally legitimate opportunities to prepare for things in the future. A daily reliance upon God's Word and Spirit will give us the grounding and traction we need to prevent our common sense preparation for tomorrow from slipping into a destructive fear of the future.

2 Timothy 4:1-5 “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I (*Paul*) give you this charge: Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction... keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.” (NIV)

1 Peter 3:15 “But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have...” (NIV)

1 Peter 1:13-22 “Therefore, prepare you minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.”... Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

In dealing with regret for the past, we correct the direction we face, from backward to forward. In dealing with fear of the future, we correct our tilt. We learn not to strain to see unknowable things at impossible distances, and instead to rend our gaze from the horizon and focus on the important things right there in front of us. We are facing the right direction on life's road, standing straight and tall, with our eyes focused on those things within our field of vision that we can successfully encounter today. What could possibly stop us now?

The answer is: *Daily addictions*. This plague is very different from the other two, and sometimes the most difficult to cure. Here our focus is not incorrectly placed way back in the past or way out in the future. It's right where it's supposed to be, on the things of today. But our progress down life's road is at a dead stand still, not because of something haunting or frightening, but because of something utterly enticing.

We are all born with strengths and weaknesses. Our weaknesses are a part of the nature to sin we've looked at before in this study. Included in our weaknesses will be voracious appetites for things within the fallen world that are cheap substitutes for the things of God that lead to Joy and Peace. They have the powerful effect of temporarily distracting us from our unhappiness, and when our hearts are prideful they are *tremendously* addicting.

What sort of daily addictions are we talking about? There are as many as there are people on the planet. They include the more obvious addictions, like alcohol, drugs, and sexual sins. People also become addicted to fame, fortune, and power. There are addictions to violence, gambling, and crime. And there are also more subtle addictions that can be just as harmful, such as gossip, entertainment, or even food.

We become addicted to these things because they temporarily distract us from our unhappiness. They are a balm that for a moment soothes the misery and despair that inevitably come from defying God and rejecting His grace. But as we saw earlier in this chapter, they cannot make us happy and they cannot last. And *because they cannot last they are extremely addictive*. We need a daily fix to keep our misery at bay, and each day that fix gets harder and harder to come by.

The first time we drink alcohol, it's not very hard to get drunk. Our bodies are not accustomed to the drug, so a couple of beers can have us flying high. But the more we drink, the more it takes to get the same effect. Our bodies build up a tolerance to the influence, and what originally took a couple of beers eventually takes a bottle of hard liquor, which along with its intoxication eventually brings death to spirit, mind, and body.

Our daily addictions work the same way. They start with something small but pleasurable that requires growth in order to sustain its effect. It doesn't have to grow much, just a little with each indulgence, but the resulting sure and steady momentum creates a powerful addiction that enslaves and then destroys everything we are.

We become addicted to these things because they temporarily distract us from being unhappy. They are an oasis within misery, and when our hearts are full of pride, we quite naturally pursue these pet pleasures to ward off the unhappiness that comes from defiance of God. And often they work quite well – for a limited period of time – until they inevitably ruin us.

Overcoming daily addictions can be one of the most difficult things we face in life. Although the pleasures they bring are temporary and destructive, they are also powerful and effective while they last. Much has to take place within our souls in order for us to conquer them, and some (especially chemical dependencies) may require professional help.

If you need professional help, by all means get it! There is absolutely no shame in that, and be encouraged – there are wonderful resources out there available to you. Go to them, and receive them as a blessing from God to help you get back on the right path.

With that caveat, for purposes of this study we will focus on six basic things that must happen in everyone in order to break an addiction.

First, we must: *Identify our addictions.* This is sort of the common sense place to start. We have to carefully examine our lives and pick out those errant things we cling to that prevent us from walking humbly and happily with God. We must look for the things holding us back and down, and often this isn't quite as easy as it might seem.

2 Corinthians 13:5 “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves...” (NIV)

Some addictions are fairly easy to identify as harmful. Problems with things like drugs, gambling, or pornography have long been recognized as addicting and destructive. That doesn't stop millions of us from turning to them every day, but we do so knowing our behavior is dangerous and wrong.

Other addictions can be less overt but equally harmful. Inordinate time spent at work or play can destroy our relationships with God and family just as effectively as drugs or alcohol. If a parent is always at work or some social club, or if a child is always in front of the television or computer, the family will have a very difficult time drawing close and growing together in their faith, as God intends. Work and play certainly have legitimate places in our lives, but when out of balance they become daily addictions that must be broken.

Some addictions sneak in under our radars disguised as virtues. We dedicate ourselves to some worthy cause, but then in our fervor to accomplish something great we fail to live up to other important responsibilities to God and family. We are willing to compromise in certain vital areas because we see our mission as a higher cause, but in truth we have grown addicted to something that is preventing us from becoming the man or woman God wants us to be.

A simple, common sense test to determine if something is an unhealthy addiction is whether it introduces anything into our lives that is adverse to the things of God. That something might be an overt sinful act, or it might be a more subtle sinful omission. Either way, it prevents us from living a life that is pleasing to God and that will bring us the Joy and Peace for which we long; and it must be overcome. Pray, and humbly ask God to help you identify any unhealthy addictions, and your loving Heavenly Father will not fail to do so. No one wants you healthy and free more than Him!

Psalm 139:23,24 “Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” (NIV)

Lamentations 3:31-42 “For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone... Why should the living complain when punished for their sins? Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD. Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven, and say: ‘We have sinned and rebelled...’ ” (NIV)

Once we have identified our addictions, a second thing we need to do is: *Acknowledge we have a problem.* We have to confess to God and to ourselves that our addiction is not some trifling matter, but rather a serious issue that prevents us from walking with God. We have to admit we are addicts. Before we will ever be able to break an addiction, we must humbly acknowledge we can't quit on our own and we need God's help.

Jeremiah 3:13-15 “Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the LORD your God... Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding.” (NASB)

Proverbs 28:13 “Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.” (NIV)

Denial is perhaps addiction's greatest ally. If we can convince ourselves we don't have a problem, then there is nothing for us to quit. Our minds are extremely adept at concocting intricate webs of denial and self-justification in order to ease a wounded conscious that knows it is doing wrong. But in order to destroy these ruinous things, we must get down on our knees before God and admit both that they exist and that they are a problem.

Psalms 32:1-11 “Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered...and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.’ And you forgave the guilt of my sin. Therefore let all the faithful pray to you while you may be found... Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD'S unfailing love surrounds the one who trusts in him. Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!” (NIV)

A third thing we need to do is: *Recognize the harm the addiction brings into our lives and the lives of others.* We have to take a long hard look at the toll the addiction is taking on ourselves and those we love. We must see the temporary distraction is not worth the damage attendant to its use, because all too often our focus on the pleasure blinds us to the havoc walking hand in hand with the distractions of the world.

This is important, because it provides the motivation we need to make a lasting change. If we view our addictions as innocuous, we will never give them up. We have to be painfully aware of the hurt to ourselves and to those around us caused by addiction in order to find the determination we need to change our thoughts and actions.

Jeremiah 8:5-17 “Why then have these people turned away?... They cling to deceit; they refuse to return. I have listened attentively, but they do not say what is right. None of them repent of their wickedness, saying, ‘What have I done?’ Each pursues their own course like a horse charging into battle... Since they have rejected the word of the LORD, what kind of wisdom do they have?... They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. ‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace. Are they ashamed of their detestable conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush. So they will fall among the fallen; they will be brought down when they are punished, says the LORD... ‘See, I will send venomous snakes among you, vipers that cannot be charmed, and they will bite you,’ declares the LORD.” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 7:10,11 “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done...” (NIV)

A fourth thing we must do is: *Recognize the blessing breaking the addiction would bring into our lives and the lives of others.* This is the flip side of the previous step. It’s the positive motivation for change. God promises that when we chose to honor and obey Him, He will guide and bless us. He will lead us down a better path, one that will bring us true Joy and Peace. And not only will breaking an addiction bless us, but it will also bless those around us, like our family and friends. That’s better than indulging ourselves in our addictions, and this realization blends with the other steps to provide us with the foundation we need to break free from destructive habits.

Hebrews 12:1-14 “... let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood... Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ‘Make level paths for your feet,’ so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.” (NIV)

Deuteronomy 11:13-15 “So if you faithfully obey the commands I (*God*) am giving you today – to love the LORD your God and to serve him with all your heart and

with all your soul – then I will send rain on your land in its season, both autumn and spring rains, so that you may gather in your grain, new wine and oil. I will provide grass in the fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied.” (NIV)

Hebrews 11:6 “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (NIV)

Proverbs 20:7 “A righteous man who walks in his integrity – how blessed are his sons after him.” (NASB)

Isaiah 49:23 “... those who hope in me (*God*) will not be disappointed.” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 2:9 “but just as it is written, ‘THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.’ ” (NASB)

These first four steps bring reality to our lives. We see what our addictions are. We admit the powerful hold they have on us. We see how they damage our relationships with Christ and others. And we see how our lives will improve if we are willing to break free. Now we are ready to take the remaining steps necessary to bring lasting change into our lives.

And so a fifth thing we must do in order to break addictions in our lives is: *Choose whom we will serve.* We now see the two paths before us clearly and accurately. One leads towards the things of the world that can temporarily distract us from unhappiness, until they destroy us. The other leads towards the things of God that build up true and lasting happiness – in other words, Joy and Peace.

Deuteronomy 30:19,20 “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the LORD your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days...” (NASB)

Joshua 24:15 “... choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...” (NIV)

Down the worldly path we serve our own pleasures, and so this road will often appear to and legitimately be the easier and more pleasant road (at least in the short term). Down the godly path we serve the Lord, and it is often (at least in the short term) the more difficult and demanding. In truth the terrain of these two divergent paths will be totally dependent upon God’s short and long term plans for our lives, and what initially appears to be pleasing or challenging may turn out to be something entirely different. What are certain are the final destinations of these two divergent paths. The way of the world leads ultimately to misery and despair. Every time. The way of God leads ultimately to Joy and Peace. Every time.

Psalm 37:1-11 “Do not fret because of evildoers, be not envious toward wrongdoers. For they will wither quickly like the grass and fade... Trust in the LORD and do good... Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of

your heart. Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He will do it. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light and your judgment as the noonday. Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him; do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, because of the man who carries out wicked schemes. Cease from anger and forsake wrath; do not fret; it leads only to evildoing. For evildoers will be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD, they will inherit the land. Yet a little while and the wicked man will be no more; and you will look carefully for his place and he will not be there. But the humble will inherit the land and will delight themselves in abundant prosperity.” (NASB)

Isaiah 57:20,21 “But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. ‘There is no peace,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked.’” (NIV)

Ecclesiastes 2:1-20 “I (*Solomon, perhaps the most powerful and wealthy man to ever live*) said to myself, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.’ But that also proved to be meaningless... what does pleasure accomplish? I tried cheering myself with wine... I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards... I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well – the delights of a man’s heart... I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor... Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun. Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom... Then I said to myself... ‘What then do I gain by being wise?... This too is meaningless.’ So I hated life... All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for... So my heart began to despair...” (NIV)

Job 20:4-8 “Surely you know how it has been from of old, ever since mankind was placed on the earth, that the mirth of the wicked is brief, the joy of the godless lasts but a moment. Though the pride of the godless person reaches to the heavens and his head touches the clouds, he will perish forever, like his own dung; those who have seen him will say, ‘Where is he?’ Like a dream he flies away, no more to be found, banished like a vision of the night.” (NIV)

Romans 2:9-11 “There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil... but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good... For there is no partiality with God.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” (NIV)

And so we are presented with a choice between the two, and we stand or fall by the decisions we make. Overcoming an addiction that afflicts you daily will require a conscious choice to reject the distractions of the world in favor of the promises of

God to fill you with Joy and Peace if you will follow Him. There must be a specific moment when you finally stop yourself and choose to get down on your knees, repent of your addictions, and commit yourself to serving God. Absent this defining moment, where you choose who you are going to be in this life, you will never conquer an addiction. It's not going to happen by accident or on its own. You are going to have to make it happen (through the wisdom and power of God's grace), and that begins with a conscious choice to serve your Creator, rather than your addictions.

Hebrews 4:7 "... just as has been said before, 'TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS.'" (NASB)

Ezekiel 18:30-32 "... I (*God*) will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit... For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!" (NIV)

And finally, in order to overcome the daily addictions we have identified, acknowledged, confessed to be harmful, seen the benefit of breaking, and chosen to be liberated from, a sixth thing we must do is: *Follow Christ daily*. Once we have made the foundational choice to serve God instead of our addictions, we have to build upon this foundation with daily decisions to follow Christ. Obviously, it's not enough to make a resolution to change and then go right back to the habits that got us in trouble in the first place. We have to follow up our resolve each day with choices that are honoring to God, not concessions to our addictions.

The key here is that we must learn to follow Christ "daily." Not for the rest of our lives, or for a year, or a month, or a week. Daily. One day at a time. This brings us back to the art of living today well, by relying on the "manna" of God; that is, His daily allotment of grace.

If you set out today to conquer all of your addictions forever, with the idea that after this day you will have all the strength you will ever need to forever be free from (fill in the blank here with your particular addiction), you will fail. Every time. You might make it for a little while, but ultimately you are destined to endure relapse after relapse, as your addiction catches up with you and pulls you down.

Why? Because the manna of God is not designed to fill you once and sustain you forever. It's designed to fill you daily and sustain you for that one particular day. Tomorrow without fail it will be there again waiting for you to sit down and eat, but it will still only sustain you for just one day.

We saw the reasons for this earlier. God wants us to depend upon Him day by day, with a daily trip to the throne of grace to receive His manna, because there is no

other way for us to walk with Him consistently. We are too weak and wayward in our pride, and the distractions of the world are too powerful and enticing to our sinful natures, for us to somehow find the strength today to overcome our addictions for the rest of our lives.

Proverbs 30:7-9 “Two things I ask of you, LORD; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ ” (NIV)

This theme is prevalent throughout God’s Word. When Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord’s Prayer, He didn’t say to ask for this year’s bread or this month’s bread. He told us to ask for our “daily” bread. He also instructed us to “take up our cross” and follow Him “daily,” not forever. The Bible even states God bears our burdens “daily.”

Luke 11:3 “Give us each day our daily bread.” (NIV)

Luke 9:23 “Then he (*Jesus*) said to them all: ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.’ ” (NIV)

Psalms 68:19 “Praise be to the Lord, to God our Savior, who daily bears our burdens.” (NIV)

That’s because the only way to break an addiction is to focus on conquering it *today*. Not tomorrow or the next day or the next. Just today. We can’t agonize about what happened yesterday, and we can’t worry about what might happen tomorrow. We have to focus solely on what is going to happen today, and trust that God will keep His promise to give us all the grace we could ever need to honor Him each individual day.

This doesn’t mean that breaking the addiction is going to be easy. Most likely it’s going to be pretty hard; otherwise it wouldn’t be an addiction. But it will be *possible*, and it will be *worth it*, if you will truly seek it. God’s Word says so.

1 Corinthians 10:13 “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.” (NASB)

1 Peter 4:19 “Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

Romans 8:18 “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 4:17,18 “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (NASB)

Galatians 6:7-10 “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Psalm 126:5,6 “Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.” (NIV)

If your mind is focused on how you are going to overcome an addiction for the rest of your life, deep down inside your mind is going to tell you that you can't do it, and it's right. We absolutely cannot gather all the spiritual resources we need to conquer an addiction forever and somehow stockpile them for the coming war. But we absolutely can overcome our addictions today, because all the spiritual resources we need for today are packed in to the daily dose of manna God provides to each of His beloved children.

Then as we learn to live life one day at a time, mastering the art of living today well, we break our additions through a daily walk with God that leads us away from the world's distractions and into the destiny God had in mind when He chose to create us. This is how we conquer our addictions forever. *Not with the burst of some lone magic bullet* that destroys the temptations of the world so they can no longer plague us, *but with a daily renewal of a powerful relationship with God* that shields us from the relentless call of temptation, until one day we leave this world behind and enter the doors of eternity hand in hand with the One whom in life we chose to walk with daily.

John 10:28,29 “and I (*Jesus*) give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 15:52-58 “... the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed... For this perishable must put on the imperishable, this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, ‘DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP IN VICTORY. O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?’... thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.” (NASB)

Enjoying the present.

As we master the art of living today well, we are healed of regret for the past, fear of the future, and daily addictions. This healing is tremendously liberating. It frees us

from three devastating plagues that injure our relationship with God, so we are able to truly walk in harmony with Him.

Then life becomes exciting and full of the Joy and Peace God intends. We actually begin to enjoy the gift of life, because we are free to fully engage with each new day God grants to us with the faith, hope, and love that come from humbly trusting in Him. The chains of past regrets, future fears, and daily addictions are broken, and we find that the manna of grace God provides each day endows us with a strength to glorify Him in the present. We cast aside regret, fear, and addiction and do what is required of us now, and this wise attention to the challenges and opportunities of each day completely transforms our lives in the best ways imaginable. Our lives become fruitful, meaningful, and satisfying. We live today well, and as a result, we are able to enjoy it.

Proverbs 31:10-31 “A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies... She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks... When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet... She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come. She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue. She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her... Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised. Honor her for all that her hands have done, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.” (NIV)

Psalms 116:1-16 “I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live. The cords of death entangled me... I was overcome by distress and sorrow. Then I called on the name of the LORD... The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion... For you, LORD, have delivered me from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living. I trusted in the LORD... Truly I am your servant, LORD... you have freed me from my chains.” (NIV)

Isaiah 52:2-12 “Shake off your dust... Free yourself from the chains on your neck... Burst into songs of joy together... for the LORD has comforted his people... the LORD will go before you, the God of Israel will be your rear guard.” (NIV)

With this freedom and productivity comes momentum. Day by day we rely upon God’s gracious provision for that particular day. Each day we are able to bring glory to God, light to the world, and increasing Joy, Peace, and blessing to ourselves. A pattern of faithfulness establishes itself that replaces the destructive patterns that brought sin into our lives, and our faith, service, and Joy and Peace grow with the steady momentum of a river flowing to the sea.

And as these days of harmony with God begin to repeat themselves and become the norm, rather than the exception, we become able to enjoy the *journey* of life. We lose our fixation upon the lofty goals we set out to achieve, and learn to appreciate the

everyday blessings God quietly bestows upon us each day. Instead of mistakenly believing “I will be happy one day when I’m finally rich, famous, successful, married, a parent, etc.,” we correctly discover we can know true Joy and true Peace *today* – *without any of that stuff* – as we journey towards whatever destiny God has in store. And with this realization we grasp something astonishing: *Where we land at the end of the journey is not what’s important. What’s important is the happiness we experience along the way.*

Psalm 107:2-43 “Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story... they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way... Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind, for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things... they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness, the utter darkness, and broke away their chains. Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds... tell of his works with songs of joy... Let the one who is wise heed these things and ponder the loving deeds of the LORD.” (NIV)

The truth is that lofty goal or ambition or dream we get so caught up in achieving is an empty phantom. It’s not where happiness resides. Happiness (that is, Joy and Peace) resides in the *relationship* we develop with our Creator, through the work of His Son, in the light of His Word, and by the power of His Spirit. And this relationship is something we take with us wherever we go. *Happiness is not a point to which we travel. It’s a state of being that travels with us*, and grows from our relationship with our holy, loving Heavenly Father.

Psalm 89:15-17 “Blessed are those who have learned to... walk in the light of your presence, LORD. They rejoice in your name all day long; they celebrate your righteousness. For you are their glory and strength...” (NIV)

Psalm 16:11 “You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.” (NIV)

Psalm 128:1,2 “How blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in His ways. When you shall eat of the fruit of your hands, you will be happy and it will be well with you.” (NASB)

Ecclesiastes 5:19 “Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil – this is a gift of God... because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart.” (NIV)

Psalm 31:14-20 “But I trust in you, LORD... my times are in your hands... How abundant are the good things that you have stored up for those who fear you... on those who take refuge in you. In the shelter of your presence... you keep them safe...” (NIV)

Psalm 73:25-28 “... besides You, I desire nothing on earth... God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever... as for me, the nearness of God is my good...” (NASB)

Psalm 62:1 “My soul finds rest in God alone...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

As these truths gradually sink in, “today” takes on a whole new significance in our lives. It becomes exceedingly precious. Before each day was just another day to toil towards that thing we think will make us happy. Now each day is a gift of life during which we can grow closer to God and serve Him, and in so doing, experience His Joy and Peace, without an all-encompassing obsession with arriving at some imagined destination where happiness will be.

Hebrews 3:12,13 “See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” (NIV)

And because each day is precious, we are much more able to appreciate the good things each day brings. We don’t overlook them in our fixation with some future goal, or get quickly bored with them and ask God: “What have you done for me lately?” Our eyes are on the present, and so we see, experience, and value whatever blessings God has granted to us this particular day.

Psalm 118:24 “This is the day which the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” (NASB)

Through the art of living today well, neither the past, present, nor future are able to hold us back or pull us down. We are granted a freedom that allows us to serve God with faith, hope, and love, as we travel hand in hand with our Heavenly Father unhindered towards His plan and purpose. And in this journey there is Joy and Peace.

Ephesians 1:18,19 “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe...” (NASB)

1 Peter 1:1-17 “... To God’s elect, strangers in the world... Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power... In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy... Since you call on a Father who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Philippians 4:6,7 “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (NASB)

Romans 15:13 “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him...” (NIV)

That’s the life God intends for us, which is tremendously encouraging. Perhaps not as encouraging, however, is the paralleling truth that, no matter how adept we become at the art of living today well, our lives will be regularly assailed by powerful forces that can bring us to our knees in an instant. All of us, even the most spiritually mature, will at times sin and fall short of the glory of God, and sometimes we will do so spectacularly. The fallen world will also do its best to pummel us at most every turn, especially when our guard is down. And as we have seen, there are times when, for no fault of our own, God will allow suffering (even great suffering) to come into our lives for a purpose He fully understands and condones, yet is totally incomprehensible to us.

These forces may strike singularly or in concert, in an all-out assault or a steady jab that chips away at our defenses, but ultimately they will wear down even the best of us. There will come a time in *every* person’s life when their world is simply shattered, and they question everything they believe is true. The greatest secular artists had periods in their lives when their art failed them, and we will all have times in our own lives when our faith seems equally distant and consumed.

And so, no matter who you are or what God has prepared for you to do, at times you are going to have spiritual crises.

At times – You will have spiritual crises (suffering, disappointment, doubt, and mission).

Let’s take a look at the words of some of the greatest figures in the Bible...

Numbers 11:4-15 “The rabble with them (*the Exodus generation of Israelites*) began to crave other food (*than manna*), and again the Israelites started wailing and said, ‘If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost – also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!’... Moses heard the people of every family wailing at the entrance to their tents. The LORD became exceedingly angry, and Moses was troubled. He asked the LORD, ‘Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their ancestors? Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me, “Give us meat to eat!” I cannot carry all these people by

myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me – if I have found favor in your eyes – and do not let me face my own ruin.’ ” (NIV)

1 Kings 19:1-5 “Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, ‘May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.’ Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. ‘I have had enough, LORD,’ he said. ‘Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.’ Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep...” (NIV)

Job 3:1-26 “... Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. He said... ‘Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb?... For now I would be lying down in peace; I would be asleep and at rest ... I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil.’ ” (NIV)

Job 7:3-21 “so I have been allotted months of futility, and nights of misery have been assigned to me. When I lie down I think, ‘How long before I get up?’ The night drags on, and I toss and turn until dawn... My days... come to an end without hope... my eyes will never see happiness again... I will not keep silent; I will speak out in the anguish of my spirit, I will complain in the bitterness of my soul... When I think my bed will comfort me and my couch will ease my complaint, even then you frighten me with dreams and terrify me with visions, so that I prefer strangling and death... I despise my life... Let me alone; my days have no meaning. What is mankind that you make so much of them, that you give them so much attention, that you examine them every morning and test them every moment? Will you never look away from me, or let me alone even for an instant? If I have sinned, what have I done to you, you who see everything we do? Why have you made me your target? Have I become a burden to you? Why do you not pardon my offenses and forgive my sins?...” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 1:8-10 “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we (*Paul and others*) experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope...” (NIV)

Moses, Elijah, Job, and Paul each had moments in their lives of such anguish and despair they wished they were dead. The pressures and injuries in their lives became such a burden they longed for death. That certainly qualifies as a spiritual crisis! And these were not people whose lack of maturity or integrity caused an undue emotional outburst. These were some of the greatest men in history. They legitimately felt violated by the afflictions of the world, and it hurt them so deeply they despaired of living.

That's one kind of crisis, a crisis that arises from *suffering*. Another kind of crisis is one that arises from *disappointment*. Something we desperately want doesn't happen, or something we desperately don't want does happen, and we are bitterly disappointed. This bitterness takes root and grows into a mighty forest of discouragement and disillusionment that can destroy our relationship with God.

Psalm 73:1-24 “Surely God is good... to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped... For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked... When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.” (NIV)

Hebrews 12:14,15 “Pursue peace with all men... See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled;” (NASB)

Sometimes our disappointment can be legitimate, and sometimes it can be baseless. Jeremiah was brokenhearted because Israel had turned from God to idol worship, a legitimate disappointment. Jonah was angry because God did not destroy Nineveh after the entire city repented and sought God's forgiveness, a pretty lousy reason to be disappointed. Whether legitimate or not, disappointment can easily lead to a spiritual crisis.

Jeremiah 20:14-18 “Cursed be the day I (*Jeremiah*) was born!... Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?” (NIV)

Lamentations 3:2-8 “He (*God*) has driven me (*Jeremiah*) away and made me walk in darkness rather than light; indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long. He has made my skin and my flesh grow old and has broken my bones. He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship. He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead. He has walled me in so I cannot escape; he has weighed me down with chains. Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer.” (NIV)

Jonah 3:10 to 4:4 “When God saw what they (*the people of Nineveh*) did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened. But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD, ‘Isn't this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.’ But the LORD replied, ‘Is it right for you to be angry?’ ” (NIV)

Another kind of crisis is one that arises from *doubt*. An example would be the life of John the Baptist. This is the man who, out of all of the billions of people created by God, was chosen to be the “voice in the wilderness” (Matthew 3:3) that heralded the coming of the Messiah. He was the extraordinary prophet who was granted the

supreme honor of being the one to proclaim to the world that the Messiah had arrived, and to identify Him through baptism (Matthew 11:9,10).

John the Baptist was truly a remarkable man! He sacrificed everything to complete his mission, living penniless in the wild on “wild honey and locust,” dressed only in “a garment of camel’s hair” (Matthew 3:4). He was eventually imprisoned and beheaded for his faith, and Jesus himself paid an extraordinary tribute to him, saying “Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist...” (Matthew 11:11).

Yet John the Baptist, this amazing prophet who was called to be the herald of the Messiah, was not without doubt! While languishing in prison, John sent a message to Jesus, saying “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Matthew 11:3).

Now this was *after* John had already baptized Jesus and announced to the world that Jesus was the Messiah – God incarnate come into the world to teach us to love and to then die for our sins. How very human of John, after suffering intensely for his mission, and accomplishing his mission so effectively, to be caught up in a crisis of doubt.

Doubt is an extremely common affliction that troubles all of us at times. Jesus’ disciples struggled with doubt even after the resurrection. And the crisis it brings makes us feel like a ship that loses its anchor in a storm.

Luke 24:38 “And He (*Jesus*) said to them (*His disciples, after the resurrection*), ‘Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?’ ” (NASB)

James 1:6 “... the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind.” (NASB)

Another kind of crisis is the one that arises from *mission*. God gives us something to do, and we simply don’t want to do it. In fact, we resist doing it with every fiber of our being, and the resulting crises are intensely powerful.

Consider Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus desperately did not want to go to the cross. This was God the Father’s central mission for the Son’s life, and Jesus knew exactly what it would entail, including the indescribable suffering He would have to endure in order to complete His mission. So quite naturally Jesus did not want to do it. Indeed, He so emphatically did not want to do it, the Bible describes Him as praying in “agony,” “deeply grieved and distressed, to the point of death,” with sweat falling “like drops of blood;” that is, in a state of tremendous spiritual crisis.

Matthew 26:36-46 “Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, ‘Sit here while I go over there and pray.’ And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed. Then He said to them, ‘My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me.’ And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will.’ And He came to the disciples and found them sleeping... He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, ‘My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done.’ Again He came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. And He left them again, and went away and prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more. Then He came to the disciples and said to them, ‘Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!’ ” (NASB)

Luke 22:41-44 “He (*Jesus*) withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and He knelt down and began to pray, saying, ‘Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done... And being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground.’ (NASB)

Spiritual crises are different from spiritual failures. They do not in and of themselves involve sin. They may (or may not) lead to sin and spiritual failures, depending upon how we choose to respond to them, but we can be doing everything right and still find ourselves in a desperate spiritual crisis. In fact, spiritual crises almost always afflict those who are growing spiritually, because we have to have a spiritual life to begin with before it can be in conflict. Spiritual lethargy cannot be conflicted, because there is nothing there to be challenged.

And that is what these things are. They are challenges to what we hold true. They get in our faces, spit in our eyes, and say “You don’t really believe that. You don’t really trust this God you pretend to worship. Your faith isn’t real. This whole life you’ve built for yourself is an illusion. It’s just wishful thinking. And I’m going to tear your pretty, convenient little house of cards down.”

These crises grow organically from life in a fallen world. Suffering and disappointment rise up, wrap their tethers around us, and start to squeeze. Doubt is a mace this world turns to like a favored weapon to pound away at the heart and mind of every thinking person. And many stories from the Bible reveal that God often asks more of His children than they think they are capable of doing.

A spiritual crisis can arise from any one of these sources – suffering, disappointment, doubt, or mission. Many times it will come from a potent blend of these pressures that together rock the very core of our faith. We suffer, which brings disappointment, which leads to doubt, which causes us to question our mission. Or

maybe we are troubled by doubt, so we abandon a mission, which then leads to disappointment and suffering. These things can assault us in any order, alone or together, interacting in an infinite variety of powerful recipes that can be lethal to our relationship with God.

And notice that no one is immune to their effects. If you are in the midst of a spiritual crisis, take comfort in knowing you are in *excellent* company. The greatest people in history, including Moses, Job, John the Baptist, and Paul, all had spiritual crises. Even Jesus Christ our Lord – God incarnate – struggled with a spiritual crisis that literally nearly killed Him before He ever got to the cross! So don't be ashamed or feel like there is something wrong with you when your crisis comes. And know this, eventually, *it will come*. If you are seeking to follow Jesus, this world will assail you regularly with as many crises as it can possibly conjure up.

John 16:33 through 17:26 “ ‘I (*Jesus*) have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.’ After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: ‘Father... I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world... My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me... Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.’ ” (NIV)

And so experiencing a crisis of faith does not mean you are a bad person, unworthy of being called a follower of Christ. It's just the opposite. It means you are genuinely alive. You are truly experiencing life in a fallen world. Your head is not in the sand, denying these forces and feelings exist. (That would be something to be ashamed of!) Instead, you experience them deeply, and you long for answers. You yearn for something that will soothe the pain of suffering, bring understanding to disappointment, eliminate the uncertainty of doubt, and inspire the completion of mission.

Where can you find something like that? What exactly do you have to do in order to overcome a spiritual crisis?

Three very difficult things:

1. Speak truthfully to God;
2. Allow God to truthfully answer; and
3. Trust God no matter what.

Speak truthfully to God.

All too often, crises inspire panic. They extinguish rational thought and provoke actions driven by uncontrolled emotions. We become totally unnerved, and in our hysteria succumb to base instincts. In other words, we freak out.

In these moments of crisis, perhaps our most basic need is to run to someone for guidance and comfort. We want to know what is going on, and what we should do, and how this is all going to turn out. We want to find whoever is in charge and ask for an explanation and for protection for ourselves and those we love.

In a spiritual crisis, that's basically where God wants us to begin. He wants us to run to Him, the One in charge, and seek guidance and comfort. And the great thing about God is that there is no need to sugar coat how we feel or wrap our words in a frosting of politically correct bureau-speak. God loves it when we talk openly and honestly to Him about how we feel. Consider the words of Job during his crisis...

Job 10:1-19 "... I will give free rein to my complaint and speak out in the bitterness of my soul. I will say to God: Do not declare me guilty, but tell me what charges you have against me. Does it please you to oppress me, to spurn the work of your hands, while you smile on the plans of the wicked?... Your hands shaped me and made me. Will you now turn and destroy me? Remember that you molded me like clay. Will you now turn me to dust again?... you stalk me like a lion and again display your awesome power against me... Why then did you bring me out of the womb? I wish I had died before any eye saw me. If only I had never come into being, or had been carried straight from the womb to the grave!" (NIV)

This is not to suggest we should be disrespectful, childish, or otherwise sinful when we call out to God in times of distress. We don't want to add sin to the already volatile mix of ingredients that make up a spiritual crisis (and if you keep reading in the book of Job, you will find God had some pretty frank words Himself for Job in responding to Job's provocative questions). The point is this: It won't help us in a crisis to dance around how we feel or say something we know we don't actually mean. If we truly want help in a time of genuine spiritual crisis, the best place to begin is by *speaking truthfully to God*.

We have to pour our hearts and minds out to God in prayer. This includes our rational thoughts and our deepest emotions. And it is totally fine to express anger, frustration, bitterness, regret – indeed, any and all negative feelings – openly and

honestly to God. You will find it cathartic to do so, and there's certainly no use in trying to hide these feelings from God. He's God, so He understands exactly how you feel, and why you feel the way you do. But often we don't truly understand our own feelings until we at least try to verbalize them, and the best person to verbalize them to is the One who created everything about us, including our feelings.

Matthew 6:8 "... your Father knows what you need before you ask him." (NIV)

Psalm 142:1-6 "I cry aloud to the LORD; I lift up my voice to the LORD for mercy. I pour out before him my complaint; before him I tell my trouble. When my spirit grows faint within me, it is you who watch over my way... I cry to you, LORD; I say, 'You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.' Listen to my cry, for I am in desperate need..." (NIV)

Psalm 102:1-17 "Hear my prayer, LORD; let my cry for help come to you. Do not hide your face from me when I am in distress. Turn your ear to me; when I call, answer me quickly. For my days vanish like smoke; my bones burn like glowing embers. My heart is blighted and withered like grass; I forget to eat my food. In my distress I groan aloud and am reduced to skin and bones ... I lie awake; I have become like a bird alone on a roof... I eat ashes as my food and mingle my drink with tears... But you, LORD, sit enthroned forever; your renown endures through all generations. You will arise and have compassion... the LORD will... respond to the prayer of the destitute..." (NIV)

Psalm 62:1-12 "My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken... Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken. My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge... One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong, and that you, O Lord, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Psalm 103:8-18 "The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love... he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children – with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts." (NIV)

If you are angry with someone, tell God about it. If you are angry with God Himself, tell Him about it. (He already knows how you feel about Him, so it won't come as a surprise, and He can take it!) If you are heartbroken, exhausted, terrified, mystified,

overflowing with doubt, or so disappointed you despair of living, tell God about it – in no uncertain terms, withholding nothing – in as much detail as you possibly can. If you are not sure how you feel, ask God to help you understand and express whatever is bottled up inside you. If you need to, figure out some way to honorably set aside some time in solitude to do this. And do not stop until absolutely *everything* you think and feel has been laid out naked and raw at the feet of your Heavenly Father.

Allow God to truthfully answer (humble your heart, ask God to speak, be still, and listen).

Then you must do something very brave. You must *allow God to truthfully answer you*. Not give you the answer you want or the answer you think you deserve, but the answer God, as an expression of His holiness and love, needs to give you in order to allow you to accomplish His plan and purpose for your life.

Just as you were open and honest with God, now you must allow God to be open and honest with you. You must allow Him to search your heart and disclose truthfully to you where you may be right or wrong, where you may be safe or in danger, and where you may or simply may not go. If you allow Him to, God will explore your thoughts and feelings with you. He'll take you by the hand and examine every item you laid at His feet, and reveal what you need to know about them in order to bring glory to Him, light to the world, and Joy, Peace, and reward to yourself.

1 Chronicles 28:9 “... serve Him with a whole heart and a willing mind; for the LORD searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will reject you...” (NASB)

Psalms 139:1-24 “O LORD, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You understand my thought from afar. You scrutinize my path and my lying down, and are intimately acquainted with all my ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O LORD, You know it all... For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother's womb... Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.” (NASB)

But be forewarned, God is no yes-man. He makes no promises to provide easy or comfortable answers, only right answers; that is, answers that will lead you down the path of life He intended before time began. Yet what could be more precious than that?

Proverbs 3:5,6 “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” (NIV)

Psalm 73:21-26 “When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” (NIV)

Psalm 37:3-40 “Trust in the LORD and do good... Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He will do it. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light... Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him... the humble will... delight themselves in abundant prosperity... the LORD sustains the righteous. The LORD knows the days of the blameless, and their inheritance will be forever... Wait for the LORD and keep His way, and He will exalt you... the salvation of the righteous is from the LORD; He is their strength in time of trouble. The LORD helps them and delivers them; He delivers them from the wicked and saves them, because they take refuge in Him.” (NASB)

Psalm 25:1-9 “To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul; in you I trust... No one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame... Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long. Remember, O LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you are good, O LORD. Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Psalm 23:1-3 “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.” (NASB)

Proverbs 4:5-18 “Acquire wisdom! Acquire understanding! (*the ability to properly apply God’s Word*)... Do not forsake her, and she will guard you; love her, and she will watch over you... Prize her, and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her. She will place on your head a garland of grace; she will present you with a crown of beauty... the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, that shines brighter and brighter until the full day.” (NASB)

Psalm 16:11 “You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.” (NIV)

So the question now becomes: How exactly do we allow God to answer these often deeply personal and extremely difficult questions?

We started this process by speaking truthfully to God. We poured our thoughts and feelings out before Him, until our cisterns of uncertainty and pain were empty and dry. We have nothing left to say. We’ve laid it all out at His feet. Now we have to do four things: *Humble our hearts, ask God to speak, be still, and listen.*

Only *humble hearts* can hear from God. If we are full of pride, arrogance, bitterness, or hatred, all of our spiritual senses shut down. We become spiritually deaf, dumb,

and blind. If we truly want to hear from God, we must get our hearts into a very humble place, where we acknowledge we don't have the answers, but in faith trust that our Heavenly Father does.

Matthew 13:10-16 “The disciples came to him (*Jesus*) and asked, ‘Why do you speak to the people in parables?’ He replied... ‘This is why I speak to them in parables: “Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.” In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.” For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them. But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.’ ” (NIV)

Psalms 115:2-7 “Why do the nations say, ‘Where is their God?’... their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell; they have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but cannot walk...” (NIV)

2 Timothy 4:3,4 “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.” (NASB)

Ephesians 4:18,19 “They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Hebrews 3:12,13 “See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” (NIV)

2 Chronicles 34:27 “Because your heart was tender and you humbled yourself before God when you heard His words... and because you humbled yourself before Me... I truly have heard you,” declares the LORD.” (NASB)

This can be unspeakably difficult when we are hurting. All of our natural, human instincts are to rage and indiscriminately attack, like a wounded animal backed into a corner. But an attacking animal can't be comforted. We have to wait for it to settle down or sedate it before we can come to its aid. And similarly God can't sit down next to us and give us words of comfort and truth until we first surrender to Him.

Job 22:21-28 “Submit to God and be at peace with him... Accept instruction from his mouth and lay up his words in your heart. If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored... Surely then you will find delight in the Almighty and will lift up your face to God. You will pray to him, and he will hear you... and light will shine on your ways.” (NIV)

It's worth repeating that it's very important to do our absolute best to air all of our grievances to God before we then try to hear from Him. Why? Because until we've gotten *all* of these things off of our chests, it's nearly impossible to truly humble our hearts. There will be pockets of hurt feelings still pent up within us that prevent us from letting go of our anger and fear. Small but powerful strongholds of resentment will close our minds to God and harden our hearts. So don't try to do this piecemeal. Get it all out there, then wholly surrender yourself to God with an open, humble heart.

Psalm 62:8 "Trust in him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge." (NIV)

Humbling your heart transports you to the correct spiritual place, where you will be able to hear from God. It makes certain that, in a spiritual sense, you are located where the voice of God resounds. Your unconditional surrender to God maneuvers you away from a noisy battlefield full of the fog and confusion of spiritual conflict, to a place where all arms and defenses are laid to rest. Your mind can clear, and your heart can stop racing. So what should you do next?

The answer is: *Ask God to speak to you.* So often we go about our lives wishing God would do this, that, and the other thing, but if we pause for a moment and think about it we would realize we never stopped complaining long enough to ask God for help. We get so caught up in what we are lacking, we forget to recognize the One who has the power to provide us with all things, and who loves us, and who has a purpose for our lives, and who will not hesitate to act on our behalf when what we seek is in keeping with His will. We forget to do one of the most elemental things in our relationship with God – earnestly present our requests before the throne of grace.

James 4:2 "... You do not have because you do not ask God." (NIV)

Hebrews 4:16 "Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (NASB)

In human relationships we have to keep in mind that our friends and loved ones are not mind readers, but God actually is a mind reader! He knows exactly what we want before we ever ask Him. Even so, God wants us to call out to Him for the desires of our hearts. Indeed, He expects us to bring our requests before Him and ask for His grace. Why? Because the act of requesting His intervention demonstrates our humble submission to Him and our absolute dependence upon His provision. We acknowledge we cannot obtain what we want through our own efforts, and instead seek the aid of our Heavenly Father.

Matthew 6:8 "... your Father knows what you need before you ask Him." (NASB)

Luke 18:1-8 "Now He (*Jesus*) was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, saying, 'In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. There was a widow in that

city, and she kept coming to him, saying, “Give me legal protection from my opponent.” For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, “Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.”’ And the Lord said, ‘Hear what the unrighteous judge said; now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?’ ” (NASB)

If we somehow can’t verbalize our requests to God in prayer, something is wrong. We may harbor some grievance against God. We may doubt His love for us. Or we may know what we want would never be in keeping with His will. In some ways, the act of actually asking for something is a test to see if our hearts are in the right place and if our motives are pure. If these are out of whack, then this is often the reason we don’t ask.

As part of humbling our hearts before God, we need to trust in certain foundational truths. God is. God loves us. God will listen to our prayers. And He will grant us those things that complement His plan for our lives. This will embolden us to bring our hearts’ desires before Him.

1 John 5:14 “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.” (NIV)

Luke 11:9-13 “So I (*Jesus*) say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you... Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he?... how much more shall your heavenly Father give... to those who ask Him?” (NASB)

James 1:5 “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.” (NASB)

We can also always trust that when we humbly ask God to speak to us, He will tell us exactly what we need to know. However, notice God reveals what we *need* to know, not necessarily what we *want* to know. We may want God to answer very specific, pointed questions relating to some critical matter in our lives, and He may comply. But He may respond with a reminder or challenge or simple truth that makes the answers to our questions irrelevant. His response may bypass our questions completely, but get to the heart of what’s really going on in our lives. One thing we can always count on is that whatever God’s response, if we choose to then trust and obey Him, our relationship with Him will become deeper, our service to Him will become more vital, and it will lead us to Joy and Peace in a fallen world. More on this later.

Jeremiah 33:3 “Call to Me and I will answer you, and I will tell you great and mighty things, which you do not know.” (NASB)

1 Chronicles 28:9 “... serve Him with a whole heart and a willing mind; for the LORD searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will reject you...” (NASB)

Jeremiah 29:13 “You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.” (NASB)

Proverbs 2:3-11 “indeed, if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will... find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding... Then you will understand what is right and just and fair – every good path. For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you.” (NIV)

After we have humbled our hearts and asked God to speak to us, the next thing to do that is absolutely necessary in order to hear from God is: *Be still*. We have to let our bodies, mouths, and minds settle into an environment of calm. Physically, our bodies must unwind. Verbally, our tongues must quit wagging. And mentally, our minds must relax.

Psalms 4:1-5 “Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness... Be gracious to me and hear my prayer... The LORD hears when I call to Him... and be still... and trust in the LORD.” (NASB)

If we are physically agitated or tense, it’s extremely difficult to sense anything but the most rudimentary instructions from God. We might feel Him shout: “Hey there, would you settle down for a minute so I can talk to you!” But we will never be able to receive careful guidance through the subtleties of life. We’re moving too fast for thoughtful conversation to catch up with us.

Job 7:3,4 “... nights of trouble are appointed me. When I lie down... I am continually tossing until dawn.” (NASB)

Isaiah 57:20,21 “But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. ‘There is no peace,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked.’ ” (NIV)

Exodus 14:13,14 “... Do not be afraid. Stand firm and... The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.” (NIV)

1 Samuel 12:16 “Now then, stand still and see this great thing the LORD is about to do before your eyes!” (NIV)

Isaiah 30:15 “This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says: ‘In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength...’ ” (NIV)

Likewise, if our mouths never shut, how can we expect our ears to open? If we can't quit talking, it's like putting our fingers in our ears and belting out an infantile tune. We'll never hear anything other than our own muffled words echoing back and forth throughout the cavern between our ears.

Matthew 6:7 “And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words.” (NASB)

Psalm 62:1-8 “My soul waits in silence for God only; from Him is my salvation. He only is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold; I shall not be greatly shaken... On God my salvation and my glory rest; the rock of my strength, my refuge is in God. Trust in Him at all times, O people... God is a refuge for us.” (NASB)

And if we can't stop our thoughts from racing, how can we expect our minds to be comforted and transformed? If our minds are spinning out of control, it's awfully hard for God's voice to punch through the chaos. And so we must bridle our thoughts like a runaway horse, gently reining them in until they slow to an easy, steady pace that can receive assurance and instruction.

Isaiah 41:10-13 “Do not fear, for I am with you; do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you... For I am the LORD your God, who upholds your right hand, who says to you, ‘Do not fear, I will help you.’ ” (NASB)

Psalm 46:1-10 “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake... The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress... He says, ‘Be still, and know that I am God...’ ” (NIV)

Being still is more than just sitting down and being verbally quiet. We can physically collapse and shut our mouths to create silence, but if our minds are whirling at a hundred miles an hour, we can't consider that being still. Every action, word, and thought must stand down, like soldiers when hostilities cease so constructive talks can begin.

It's pretty straightforward to still our actions and words. We simply choose to physically relax and stop talking. Stilling our minds can be much more difficult. Fear, worry, confusion, and anxiety don't necessarily leave the building when we ask them politely. Many times they have to be forced out.

And there is only thing with the power to do that: Faith. As we saw earlier in this study, a heart full of faith creates a mind full of hope, and hope drives fear and all of its evil cohorts (like worry, confusion, and anxiety) out of the mind, so we can love.

Faith and the hope and love it creates are therefore our greatest allies in the battle to still the mind.

Matthew 8:26 "... You of little faith, why are you so afraid?..." (NIV)

Psalm 56:3,4 "When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid..." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Psalm 27:1-3 "The LORD is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid?... Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then will I be confident." (NIV)

Job 11:13-18 "... if you devote your heart to him (*God*)... if you put away the sin that is in your hand... then you will lift up your face without shame; you will stand firm and without fear... You will be secure, because there is hope..." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Romans 15:13 "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (NIV)

1 Timothy 1:5 "But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." (NASB)

1 John 4:18 "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear..." (NIV)

Psalm 34:4 "I sought the LORD, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears." (NIV)

If you find your thoughts are out of control, try this (which we first looked at in Chapter 5 in examining how to solve life's various problems, whether they be with circumstances or relationships). Search through the scriptures you have learned and grab on to a verse or two that relate to what you are going through. Hang on to them with the tenacity of a pit bull on a postman. Speak them out loud. Repeat them a few times, and start to focus your mind on the truths they represent. Examine these truths very carefully, and ask God to reveal all they mean to you. Then ask God to help you apply these truths to your particular situation and discover what He would have you do.

If as a part of this process you will choose to trust in the promises of God and follow His leading, these acts of faith will in turn fill your mind with a living hope, which will drive out every fear and enable you to be still before God. The fears that excrete anxious and uncontrollable thoughts will be expelled, and in their absence your mind will be able to settle into a hope-filled state of calm. And in the resulting stillness God's answers will resound.

Psalm 94:19 "When my anxious thoughts multiply within me, Your consolations delight my soul." (NASB)

Isaiah 30:15-18 "For thus the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel, has said, 'In repentance and rest you will be saved, in quietness and trust is your strength...' the LORD longs to be gracious to you, and therefore He waits on

high to have compassion on you... How blessed are all those who long for Him.” (NASB)

Psalm 51:6 “Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being, and in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom.” (NASB)

Philippians 4:6,7 “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 14:33 “for God is not a God of confusion but of peace...” (NASB)

In a sense, humbling our hearts takes us to *where* we need to be in order to hear from God. Being still is *how* we need to be in order to hear from God. Humility transports us to the proper spiritual location. Stillness creates the proper spiritual environment within this place.

Why do we need to be still in order to hear from God? We saw in Chapter 3 that God most often speaks in a gentle whisper. As with Elijah in 1 Kings 19, God might use earthquakes and firestorms to get our attention, but when He wants to tell us something, it’s usually not His way to shout. Instead, He speaks in a soft and tender voice. And when someone speaks to you this way, you have to be still and quiet or you will miss it.

God extends the truth of His grace in a gentle, quiet voice because He is not trying to force anything on anyone. He’ll use the intensity of crises and suffering to get our undivided attention if necessary, like a responsible parent disciplining a wayward child, but once that’s established, He reveals His will in a clear but soft voice that respects our freewill. He is not going to try to impress us with theatrics or intimidate us with volume. He will gently reveal truth, then allow us to choose.

If we’ve not poured out all of our thoughts and feelings to God, we will never be able to be still before Him. It’s the necessary first step that allows us to purge ourselves of sufficient negative attitudes so we can then humble our hearts and create the environment of stillness that will allow the gentle voice of God to be heard. Unexpressed hurt and anger stir up our minds like a tempest raging at sea. Exhaustively communicating these things to God allows the storms they create to blow themselves out, and leaves tranquil waters where Heavenly Father and earthly child can meet and genuinely connect.

If we cannot become still before God, we will never be able to hear His voice. The noise and clamor of our worry and distress will drown out the voice of God that seeks to comfort us. All we will be able to hear will be the voices of defiance, compromise, and doubt this world loves to amplify and broadcast in our ears at every waking moment. We must therefore learn to make a conscious decision to shut our ears to the distracting cries of the world, and through faith drive out all of our

debilitating fears, and in the living hope that fills our minds allow a stillness to settle around us that brings with it God's presence and voice.

In a sense, being quite before God is a test to see if we have truly humbled our hearts, because prideful, willful hearts can never shut up. We are too self-centered and arrogant to stop babbling on and on and on, which means we don't really want to hear what God has to say at all, and we've never reached the state of humility necessary to receive truth from our Creator. Knee deep in growing piles of our own pride, we are quite content listening to a never ending stream of our own drivel.

Proverbs 15:2 "... the mouth of fools spouts folly." (NASB)

Psalm 131:1,2 "My heart is not proud, O LORD, my eyes are not haughty... But I have stilled and quieted my soul;" (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Being still is also a test to see whether we truly trust God. As important as it is to lay all of our thoughts and feelings out before our Heavenly Father, it is equally important at some point to reasonably come to the conclusion we have had our say, and now it's time to be still and let God reply. We've thoroughly expressed our doubts, fears, and anger, and now we need to let them go long enough to allow God to respond. And it takes faith to do that! We have to truly believe that, as great as our hurts are, God is greater still, and He has the balm to heal our wounds if we will be still long enough to allow Him to apply it.

Psalm 37:1-8 "Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong... Trust in the LORD and do good... Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noontday sun. Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him... Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret — it leads only to evil." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Psalm 30:1-12 "I will exalt you, LORD, for you lifted me out of the depths... I called to you for help, and you healed me... To you, LORD, I called; to the Lord I cried for mercy... You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. LORD my God, I will praise you forever." (NIV)

Isaiah 57:15-18 "For this is what the high and exalted One says – he who lives forever, whose name is holy: 'I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite... I will heal them; I will guide them and restore comfort...'" (NIV)

Psalm 147:1-3 "Praise the LORD!... He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." (NASB)

Stillness shifts our focus from ourselves to God. It's the crucial turning point that demonstrates we've said all we need to say, and now we are willing to settle down and humbly listen to God's reply with an open mind and eager heart. Whatever

grievances we might have (whether legitimate or unfounded) have been aired, and our true desire is to repent of any sin born out of our pride and receive correction, comfort, and instruction from the God whom we know loves us. And to this invitation our holy, loving God never fails to respond.

Psalm 25:14 “The LORD confides in those who fear him...” (NIV)

Jeremiah 29:13 “You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.” (NASB)

Deuteronomy 4:29-31 “... if... you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul... For the LORD your God is a merciful God; He will not abandon or destroy you or forget...” (NIV)

1 Chronicles 28:9 “... serve Him with a whole heart and a willing mind; for the LORD searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will reject you...” (NASB)

James 1:5 “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.” (NASB)

Isaiah 58:2-11 “... seek Me day by day, and delight to know My ways... delight in the nearness of God... Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth; and your righteousness will go before you; the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer... And the LORD will continually guide you, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, and give strength to your bones; and you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.” (NASB)

We have humbled our hearts. We have asked God to speak. We have stilled our bodies, mouths, and minds. Now in order to allow God to truthfully answer when we call to Him, a final thing we must do is: *Listen*.

This is the culmination of everything that has come before. Genuine humility, a sincere request, and the following stillness all work together to bring us to a point where we can truly listen and honestly hear. They clear away every impediment to communication with God, whether those barriers come from the distractions of the world or the prideful shortcomings of our own hearts. We humble ourselves, call out to God, and settle into a place of faith-filled calm. And as we do, we are cleansed from those things both in the world and within ourselves that deafen us to God’s voice, so we are prepared to receive God’s truthful answers.

So exactly how should we listen for God? Two things are essential – *expectancy* and *patience*. First, we have to expect God will answer. We must trust that God is going to make His will known. If we don’t believe God will respond when we call out to Him, our lack of faith makes it very difficult to hear His voice.

Psalm 17:6 “I call on you, my God, for you will answer me...” (NIV)

Hebrews 11:6 “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (NIV)

James 1:5-8 “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.” (NASB)

Psalms 5:2-12 “Hear my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray... in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly... Lead me, LORD, in your righteousness... make your way straight before me... let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in you. Surely, LORD, you bless the righteous; you surround them with your favor as with a shield.” (NIV)

Micah 7:7,8 “But as for me, I will watch expectantly for the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me. Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy. Though I fall I will rise; though I dwell in darkness, the LORD is a light for me.” (NASB)

Isaiah 49:23 “... those who hope in me (*God*) will not be disappointed.” (NIV)

The paralleling principle is that, while we should listen with faith-filled expectancy for God’s answers, we must also wait for those answers patiently. We should not presume to have the right to tell God when to answer. All too often we try to put God in a headlock and force an answer out of Him, when in His plan it’s not time for answers, it’s time to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit of patience. And so we must have the faith that answers will come, but also the faith that answers will come at the right time.

Psalms 40:1-4 “I waited patiently for the LORD; and He inclined to me and heard my cry. He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay, and He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; many will see and fear and will trust in the LORD. How blessed is the man who has made the LORD his trust, and has not turned to the proud, nor to those who lapse into falsehood.” (NIV)

Hebrews 6:10-15 “God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him... We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised. When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying, ‘I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.’ And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised.” (NIV)

Lamentations 3:21-57 “This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. The LORD’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. ‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I have hope in Him.’ The LORD is good to those who

wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him. It is good that he waits silently for the salvation of the LORD... I called on Your name, O LORD, Out of the lowest pit. You have heard my voice, 'Do not hide Your ear from my prayer for relief, from my cry for help.' You drew near when I called on You; You said, 'Do not fear!' ” (NASB)

1 Peter 5:6,7 “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.” (NIV)

Psalm 27:1-14 “The LORD is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid?... Hear my voice when I call, LORD; be merciful to me and answer me... Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me... Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.” (NIV)

Psalm 38:15 “LORD, I wait for you; you will answer, Lord my God.” (NIV)

Expectancy and patience are not contradictory virtues, when tied together with the bond of faith. Faith ensures we expect answers to come, but we have the patience to wait on God's perfect timing. Without faith, expectancy fades into doubt, and patience slips into anxiety, and it's very hard for doubt-filled, anxious ears to hear God's voice.

Ezekiel 12:2 “... They have eyes to see but do not see and ears to hear but do not hear, for they are a rebellious people.” (NIV)

Matthew 13:10-16 “The disciples came to him (*Jesus*) and asked, ‘Why do you speak to the people in parables?’ He replied... ‘This is why I speak to them in parables: “Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.” In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.” For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them. But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.’ ” (NIV)

Hebrews 3:12,13 “See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.” (NIV)

So exactly what should we listen for? In what form should we expect God's answers to come? We've humbled ourselves. We've asked God to speak truthfully. We are still. And we are listening, with patient expectation. How will God answer?

We've already touched on this in Chapter 6, where we looked at how God reveals His will. In general, God can speak to us through:

- God's Word;

- (Natural) Abilities and (God-given) Passions;
- Wise Counsel;
- Circumstances; and
- God's Spirit.

As you humbly pray, make your requests known to God, be still, and listen, God may lead your mind to a verse of scripture that speaks powerfully to your particular need. The vast majority of times, the answers to our questions have already been revealed in God's Word, and God's Spirit will help us remember these truths and properly apply them to our circumstances. This should serve as a reminder of how vital it is to learn God's Word and memorize scripture, so in times of crises we have these treasures to call upon.

Psalm 119:9-165 "How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Your word... Your word I have treasured in my heart... Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your law... Strengthen me according to Your word... I shall run the way of Your commandments, for You will enlarge my heart... Teach me good discernment and knowledge, for I believe in Your commandments... The law of Your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces... How sweet are Your words to my taste! Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth! From Your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way. Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path... You are my hiding place and my shield; I wait for Your word. Depart from me, evildoers, that I may observe the commandments of my God... The unfolding of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple... My eyes anticipate the night watches, that I may meditate on Your word... The sum of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous ordinances is everlasting... my heart stands in awe of Your words. I rejoice at Your word, as one who finds great spoil... Those who love Your law have great peace, and nothing causes them to stumble." (NASB)

John 14:26 "... He (*the Holy Spirit*) will... bring to your remembrance all that I (*Jesus*) said to you." (NASB)

Proverbs 6:22,23 "When you walk about, they (*the truths in God's Word*) will guide you; when you sleep, they will watch over you; and when you awake, they will talk to you. For the commandment is a lamp, and the teaching is light..." (NASB)

2 Peter 1:2-4 "Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world..." (NASB)

Sometimes, the answers we seek may be right before our eyes, revealed through the way God created us. Our natural abilities and God-given passions may lead us to common sense answers and comfort when we lose our way. How God made you

will help you understand His purpose for your life, which can provide the direction you need to find your way out of the storms of spiritual crises.

Psalm 139:1-16 “You have searched me, LORD, and you know me... For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made... your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.” (NIV)

1 Peter 4:10 “As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” (NASB)

Romans 12:5-8 “so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly... he who teaches... he who exhorts... he who gives... he who leads... he who shows mercy...” (NASB)

2 Timothy 1:6-9 “... fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you... God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord... by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Many times God sends wise counsel through men and women (and boys and girls) to strengthen and encourage us during difficult times. As noted earlier, we should always test the counsel we receive against God’s Word, because God’s answers will never contradict His written Word, but it’s clear God often speaks to us through the wise counsel of others when we don’t know where to turn, what to do, or how to endure. And God particularly likes to use brothers and sisters in Christ who have been through the same (or similar) spiritual crises as you to encourage and guide you in your time of need.

Proverbs 13:20 “He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.” (NASB)

Proverbs 19:20 “Listen to counsel and accept discipline, that you may be wise the rest of your days.” (NASB)

Hebrews 10:24,25 “and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another...” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 1:3-5 “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.” (NIV)

Galatians 6:2-5 “Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ... But each one must examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another. For each one will bear his own load.” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 2:5 "... your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God." (NASB – 1975 ed.)

Colossians 3:15-17 "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts... Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another... Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father." (NASB)

God also answers through our circumstances. As we patiently wait for God to explain a crisis, sometimes we discover His will and purpose through a change in our circumstances. Some event takes place that brings light to the darkness and reveals God's answer. And sometimes, a lack of change in our circumstances can indicate God's answer is for us to wait patiently and endure.

Psalms 65:1-5 "Praise awaits you, O God... O you who hear prayer, to you all men will come... You answer us with awesome deeds of righteousness..." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Psalms 81:7-10 "In your distress you called and I rescued you, I answered you... I am the LORD your God..." (NIV)

James 1:2-4 "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." (NASB)

Isaiah 40:28-31 "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth... gives strength to the weary, and to him who lacks might He increases power... those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary." (NASB)

Finally, we come to God's Spirit. We've seen how God can reveal His will by either granting Peace or causing unrest about some decision. We make a choice, and God's Spirit fills us with a comforting Peace that confirms we are doing the right thing, or we are filled with a disquiet that warns us we have made the wrong decision.

Romans 2:9-11 "There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil... but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good... For there is no partiality with God." (NASB)

Psalms 119:165 "Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble." (NIV)

Proverbs 3:13-26 "Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed... My son, do not let wisdom and understanding out of your sight, preserve sound judgment and discretion; they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your

neck. Then you will go on your way in safety, and your foot will not stumble. When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, for the LORD will be at your side and will keep your foot from being snared.” (NIV)

Isaiah 57:20,21 “But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. ‘There is no peace,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked.’ ” (NIV)

As you seek God’s answers and comfort during times of spiritual crisis, God’s Spirit may communicate with you in other ways. In the stillness of your earnest prayers, as you meditate on God’s Word and humbly ask Him to speak to you, God’s Spirit may bring an image to your mind, or a song, or a memory, or an impression that defies earthly description, and through these things tell you all you need to know.

Psalm 51:6 “Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being, and in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom.” (NASB)

But this is an area where we must be very, very careful. The stress and confusion of crises, the deceits of the world, and our own sinful natures can easily conjure up any number of “signs” for us to eagerly misinterpret in order to hear the “answers” we want to hear, but do not come from God. They represent our own desires, not His, and give us excuses to do things we have already determined to do, regardless of God’s will and in defiance of His Word. And so, as with the counsel we receive from others, we should be careful to test these things against God’s Word. A message that is truly from God will never contradict God’s Word.

Jeremiah 17:9 “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (NIV)

Isaiah 29:13 “The Lord says: ‘These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.’ ” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Jeremiah 14:14-16 “... The prophets are prophesying falsehood in My (*God’s*) name. I have neither sent them nor commanded them or spoken to them; they are prophesying to you a false vision, divination, futility and the deception of their own minds... I will pour out their own wickedness on them.” (NASB)

2 Timothy 3:2-7 “For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant... holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; avoid such men as these. For among them are those who enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (NASB)

2 Timothy 4:3,4 “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.” (NASB)

Jeremiah 29:8,9 “Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,’ declares the LORD.” (NIV)

Yet at the same time, our hearts and minds should be open to receiving God’s counsel, however He chooses to provide it. Sometimes we put God in a pre-conceived box and only heed those messages that conveniently fall into it, and because of our narrow-mindedness we miss genuine promptings that would be truly beneficial. This then becomes just another way of limiting God’s answers to those we’ve already determined to hear.

And so, when these inevitable spiritual crises assail you and you desperately want to hear from God, you should do this:

- *Speak truthfully* to God. Pour your heart out to Him and share how you really feel, including all of your pain, disappointments, doubts, worries, and grievances.
- Once you’ve truly expressed all of these feelings, you must lay them all down at God’s feet, and *humble yourself* before Him. Tell Him that, even though you have all of these feelings, you acknowledge He is God and you are not, and you trust He has a purpose in all things, and His purpose is good.
- Then *ask God to answer* you. Ask Him to reveal whatever you need to know in order to overcome this crisis. And remember, what you need to know may be something you’ve never considered before, even something that seems unrelated to all you’ve laid at God’s feet. So be sure to keep your heart and mind open, and ask to learn what God thinks is important, not what you think is important.
- After you’ve made your requests known, as the Psalmist says in Psalm 46, you must: “*be still*, and know that He is God.” Calm your body; silence your tongue; and quiet your mind. Truly rest in the knowledge and belief that our holy, loving Heavenly Father has heard your prayer and will respond at just the right time, with just the right answers, according to His perfect plan and purpose.
- Then *listen*, with expectancy and patience. In the stillness you have created, be attentive to any scripture, counsel, image, or impression God’s Spirit may bring to your mind. As you consider alternatives, note whether they bring with them feelings of Peace or disquiet. Be receptive to the promptings of plain ole common sense, as it relates to your passions, abilities, and the crisis in general. Reflect on any changes in your circumstances (or lack of change) and consider what this may reveal. Let everything you have learned of God and experienced in your relationship with Him comfort and counsel you

through the storm. And test everything you think you hear against the perfect standard of God's Word.

This process will help tremendously in times of spiritual crisis. But it shouldn't be just an emergency procedure we turn to as a last resort when our worlds fall apart. It should become a *lifestyle* that blends into our daily living, where we are constantly having honest talks with God about how we feel and what's going on in our lives, followed by humble requests for God to reply just as honestly with us, and open, quite hearts listening intently for God's answers, however they may come, with expectancy and patience. This daily dialogue between Heavenly Father and earthly child will result in a powerful and fulfilling *relationship* that is our greatest ally in conquering spiritual crises. We are able to overcome them, because God is by our side through them.

What kinds of answers can we expect from God? During times of suffering, God may reveal the purpose the suffering serves in His plan and how your pain serves some higher cause. In times of disappointment, God may reveal why He chose to allow something to happen (or not happen) and, as with suffering, why this is important and necessary in His design. When plagued by doubt, God may send something that strengthens your faith and eliminates your uncertainty. And when daunted by mission, God may answer with something that truly inspires you and fills you with resolve.

Or He might not. He might be (seemingly) totally silent. You spill out your guts to Him, genuinely humble yourself before His mighty presence, reverently ask Him for His priceless counsel, settle into a place of pristine stillness, and listen with the ears of an elephant.

And nothing happens. No signs. No wonders. No promptings of any nature. Just the spiritual equivalent of crickets chirping. What could God want from you?

Trust God no matter what – Faith in the absence of answers (part 2).

Sometimes, God answers with the speed of lightning in a voice like thunder. It's blindingly fast and impossible to miss. And from our human perspective, we like it that way, because it immediately satisfies our needs. There is an instant gratification of our desires in which we delight.

From the divine perspective, this sometimes also delights God. He loves His children more than we can even begin to comprehend, and of course He wants to intercede quickly and decisively. He derives no pleasure from watching His children in crises.

But many times, He can use suffering and disappointment, and even doubt and hesitancy (in regards to mission), in powerful ways to bring about tremendous good in a fallen world. These four crises are things every single person on the planet struggles with at some point in his or her life, so when one of God's children endures them, but is not overcome by them, and instead is able to know Joy and Peace despite them, God is truly glorified and the darkness of the world is authentically illuminated.

But that can't happen particularly well when God's answers are fast and loud. Nor is it really possible in a fallen world where people are free to choose between good and evil. If God swooped down and sorted out every crisis in the blink of an eye, faith gets removed from the equation and replaced with entitlement. We ask and we receive, right then and there, or we impugn God and call a lawyer, because after all, we have "rights." And freewill would have just about the shortest reins imaginable, where anyone out of line (including you and me) would get a divine smack down as soon as they caused any trouble.

These narrow parameters just aren't possible in a world where people are truly free to choose, so God exercises His divine discretion, as is His right as the sovereign Creator of the world, to choose how quickly and how distinctly to answer when we call out to Him during a spiritual crisis – all depending upon what is best according to His holy, loving plan and purpose. It might serve Him and our fellow mankind most if God responds immediately. Or it might be better if He waits a little while so our faith can grow and bring light to the world. Or it may be we are called to wait a really long time.

Another possibility is we get an answer, quickly and clearly, but it's not what we want to hear. It's a great big "no," when we were praying fervently for a "yes." And hearing a resounding "no" from our Heavenly Father can chill us to the bone, as its implications sink in like a freezing drizzle on a winter's night.

So in all this – answers that are fast or slow, yes or no – what does God really want from us? What is He truly after?

As we saw earlier in this study, God wants us to *trust Him no matter what*. Regardless of the timing or content of His answers, God wants us to trust that He is, He loves us, and He has a plan and purpose that are good, both for us and for all humanity. We also have to accept that our finite minds cannot even begin to understand the complexities of this plan (so we can't always expect Him to stop and try to explain it every time we want Him to), and often more glory comes to God and more light comes to the world when we trust Him in the absence of answers.

Isaiah 50:10 "... Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on their God." (NIV)

Psalm 126:5,6 “Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.” (NIV)

The foundational truths (the answers to everything).

God does not always immediately provide us with specific answers to specific problems. The volatile alchemy between freewill and a fallen world prohibits this. What God has done instead is provide us with certain foundational truths about our relationship with Him, which – once we truly grasp and embrace them – make the other answers (whether we presently realize it or not) superfluous. These foundational truths are the constants that calm every fear and inspire confident hope and courageous love. They become the answers to everything.

What these truths are may be different for different people. Everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses, and areas where they may be brave or fearful. We are all unique, with different journeys to take, and the constants we require are equally unique. You should consider and develop your own list of foundational truths to rely upon, but here are a few that most of us cannot do without:

- God exists. (Exodus 3:13,14)
- God is holy. (1 Peter 1:15,16)
- God is love. (1 John 4:8)
- God loves me. (Romans 5:8)
- When I put my faith in Jesus, I was saved forever. (Ephesians 1:13,14)
- God will never leave me nor forsake me. (Hebrews 13:5,6)
- God has a divine plan, both for all humanity and me individually. (Ephesians 2:10)
- There is a good reason for all things, even if I cannot fathom it. (1 Peter 4:19)
- God will work all things together for good. (Romans 8:28)
- God will never test me more than I am able to bear. (1 Corinthians 10:13)
- God will reward my faith. (Hebrews 11:6)
- Regardless of what happens in this life, one day I will go to be with God for all eternity. (Philippians 3:8-21)
- And in eternity, God will make all things new and all things right. (Revelation 7:17)

With these truths, if we will trust God to keep His Word, we don't really need the other answers. They are not essential to knowing Joy and Peace in a fallen world. They might be nice and greatly desired in times of crises, but at the end of the day they are not what we truly need.

Detailed answers to the who, what, when, where, why, and how of spiritual crises rarely get us to the heart of the matter – which is essentially: Do we trust God? They are akin to miracles, where we want God to perform for us like a circus monkey and prove He is real and able and caring. And like miracles, God’s Word reveals that reliance upon these things actually hinders our spiritual growth, rather than contributes to it. We become dependent upon them like a spiritual drug required to induce faith. And eventually their efficacy wears off, and we are revealed to be empty, frail vessels completely devoid of any true spiritual substance or grit.

Matthew 16:1-4 “The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. He replied, “... a wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Psalm 78:32 “In spite of all this, they (*the Exodus generation, who witnessed miracles every day for 40 years*) kept on sinning; in spite of his wonders, they did not believe.” (NIV)

Luke 16:19-31 “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’ But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’ He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’ ‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ ” (NIV)

John 20:24-29 “Now Thomas... one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came (*after the resurrection*). So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord!’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.’ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.’ Thomas said to him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ Then Jesus told him, ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’ ” (NIV)

1 Peter 4:19 “Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

What we *do* need in times of spiritual crises are not answers to the specifics, but rather something solid to plant our feet upon, something unequivocally clear and stable that will give us strength and firm footing no matter what form the crisis takes or what weapons it employs against us. Then we are ready for anything, and we will be able to take our stand and speak the truth with love.

And that's what these foundational truths about God are. They are the things that will truly bring us strength, resolve, resilience, and "Joy inexpressible" and "Peace surpassing comprehension," if we will embrace them, by choosing to trust God to keep these amazing, infinitely precious promises. Miraculous answers and deeds are ultimately superficial in the spiritual realm, while faith in the foundational truths has depth, power, meaning, and impact beyond our ability to comprehend.

**Galatians 5:6 "... The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."
(NIV)**

Consider Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. The night before Jesus was sent to the cross, He went to this garden and poured His heart out to God in such anguish "His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground." Jesus made His request known to God praying "may this cup be taken from Me," but He also humbled Himself, and continued "yet not as I will, but as you will" and "may your will be done." He waited in the garden for answers, and when they were not forthcoming (and despite His disciples' failure to even stay awake with Him), He repeated His prayer three times. How did God finally answer His beloved Son?

Matthew 26:36-56 "Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.' He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.' Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.' Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping... He went away a second time and prayed, 'My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.' When he came back, he again found them sleeping... So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing... Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people... Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him... In that hour Jesus said to the crowd, '... this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled.' Then all the disciples deserted him and fled." (NIV)

Luke 22:44 "And being in anguish, he (*Jesus*) prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground." (NIV)

Jesus' repeated, earnest prayers to be spared from the cross were answered by men with clubs and swords who arrested Him and took Him to the Sanhedrin. God responded with circumstances that made it dramatically clear His answer was "no." But the Father's denial also led to the greatest act in human history, the atonement of our sins by His Son, and salvation was made available to all humanity. And notice how Jesus responded to the denial – with a faithful reliance upon the scriptures that comforted Him with the knowledge these things were coming to pass so He could fulfill His purpose in God's plan.

Paul had a "thorn in the flesh" (some kind of problem that is not revealed in scriptures) that tormented him relentlessly. He prayed three times for it to be removed, and each time his prayer was denied. And God didn't reveal any specifics as to why. Instead God shared the more fundamental truths that "My grace is sufficient, and My power is made perfect in weakness." In other words, God didn't say yes and He didn't explain specifically why, but God did assure Paul that God's grace would sustain and perfect him, despite the suffering. And Paul trusted God, and went on to write much of the New Testament and become one of the greatest men in history.

2 Corinthians 12:5-10 "... I will not boast about myself (*Paul*), except about my weaknesses... to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong." (NIV)

The purpose of prayer.

Notice our prayers don't necessarily change our circumstances or God's plan for our lives. Sometimes they do. God always listens to our prayers and often gives us what we ask for. He changes our circumstances and the course of our lives because we ask Him to do so. But sometimes God denies our prayers, as with Jesus and Paul (and many others throughout the Bible), because God had something greater in store.

What is important is not that our prayers change God or our circumstances, but that our prayers change *us*. The acts of being open and honest with God, humbling ourselves, making our requests known, being still, and listening each bring about powerful, life-altering changes to our hearts and minds, and it's through these changes we find the Joy and Peace for which we long, and we are able to go forth and accomplish God's purpose. And so as we sit down to pray, this should be our goal, *not to conform God to our will, but to conform ourselves to His will*, so no matter what answers

we receive from God, we are fully equipped to meet the challenges of life in a fallen world in a manner that will bring glory to God, light to the world, and Joy, Peace, and blessing to us.

Romans 12:1,2 “... offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.” (NIV)

Ephesians 4:15-24 “... speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ... be made new in the attitude of your minds; and... put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” (NIV)

Through these changes in the deepest recesses of our hearts and minds, we find what it is we long for in spiritual crises. Our sufferings are soothed by the assurance we have that our pain serves a worthy purpose. Likewise our disappointments are tempered by an understanding that God’s plan is perfect and encompasses all things, even our greatest regrets, and when we trust Him, He works all things together for good, both in time and in eternity. When assailed by doubt, a humble, still, attentive heart that has been poured out before God always receives back a message of overflowing comfort that eliminates our fears and restores our hope. And when daunted by mission we find inspiration that cures our hesitation and fills us with boldness and resolve.

“Trusting God no matter what” is just another way of saying we should have the “faith unto death” we looked at earlier in this chapter. And this kind of faith accomplishes something essential to knowing Joy and Peace in a fallen world.

Bursting spiritual bubbles.

As we mature as followers of Jesus, we begin to learn God’s Word and start to apply it to our lives. Sometimes we get things right, and sometimes we get things wrong. When we get things wrong, often it’s because we distort God’s Word so it will fit in with our pre-conceived and self-serving notions of what faith should be. We have an outcome that suits our desires, but is not in keeping with God’s Word, and we build up false spiritual principles to get what we want. And sometimes, we just make mistakes in interpreting the scriptures.

These lead to what we can think of as “spiritual bubbles;” that is, strongly held beliefs that can temporarily prop us up and give us a sense of spiritual growth, when in truth they are full of the deceits of the world, and they are destructive to ourselves, others, and the cause of Christ. Like the economic bubbles we sometimes read about and experience, there is growth built upon an illusion of worth that ultimately bursts, and all that was constructed upon it comes crashing down.

Proverbs 16:25 “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.” (NASB)

Isaiah 29:13 “The Lord says: ‘These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.’ ” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

2 Timothy 4:3,4 “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.” (NASB)

Romans 16:17,18 “... watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.” (NIV)

2 Timothy 3:2-7 “For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant... holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; avoid such men as these. For among them are those who enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (NASB)

Romans 10:2,3 “... they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness.” (NIV)

Obadiah 1:3,4 “ ‘The arrogance of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rock, in the loftiness of your dwelling place, who say in your heart, ‘Who will bring me down to earth?’ Though you build high like the eagle, though you set your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down,’ declares the Lord.” (NASB)

We have seen how spiritual crises can arise when we are doing everything right. But they are also extremely good at bursting the spiritual bubbles that develop when we get things wrong. Indeed, spiritual crises almost always follow the development of a spiritual bubble, because the bad choices that lead to spiritual bubbles inevitably precipitate crises in our lives. Then suffering, disappointment, doubt, and/or difficult missions descend upon us, and the pressures they bring are too much for the bogus shell of a spiritual bubble to endure. So it explodes.

As it does, all the fallacies and impurities within are expelled and exposed. The junk that filled the bubble and gave us the illusion of growth comes flying out, and as it splatters around us it’s revealed to be toxic, instead of nourishing. And what remains often looks like an open wound.

But that’s great, because that’s exactly what we need in order to regain our spiritual vigor. When these bubbles finally burst and all the poison inside is expelled, we can then be washed clean. The raw place can heal, and we can move forward with lives

that are spiritually healthy and genuinely strong. Like a boil that must be lanced, drained, and sterilized, these spiritual bubbles must be torn open and swept clean, so true spiritual growth and service can occur.

Legalism would be an example of a spiritual bubble. We read up on the various mandates in the Bible, cherry pick a few we are pretty good at keeping, and then make rigorous adherence to these lists our litmus test for righteous living. We judge our spiritual lives (and the spiritual lives of others) by how well these particular rules are followed.

Colossians 2:2-23 “... be encouraged... attaining to all the wealth that comes from full assurance of understanding... so that no one may delude you with persuasive argument... See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ... Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize... why... do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, ‘Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!’... in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion... but are of no value...” (NASB)

Since we inevitably pick the rules we are naturally inclined to follow, we start to feel pretty good about ourselves and our ability to tow our self-prescribed spiritual lines. We think we are growing, because we are able to follow a certain set of rules, and we judge and condemn anyone who can't do as well as we do.

Then a spiritual crisis hits. We suffer some pain or disappointment and can't figure out why, since we are following our rules so faithfully. Or our faith is rocked by something, and we are overcome with doubt. Or we are given a mission that exposes our weaknesses, instead of our strengths. And the pressures build until the thin, self-righteous veneer that coated our particular spiritual bubble pops, and our arrogance spills out around us and is exposed for what it is.

But as we stare in shock at the pile of refuse around us, (if we will humble our hearts) we start to see where we went wrong. We discover the fiction we had based our lives upon. And when we then return to the scriptures with newly opened eyes, we encounter the brilliant light of grace and come to understand how true submission to God's laws must be married with mercy and compassion in a way that transcends mere obedience to inflexible rules.

Matthew 23:1-24 “Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, saying: ‘The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them. They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling

to move them with so much as a finger... Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!’ ” (NASB)

Another kind of spiritual bubble develops from the converse of legalism. Instead of holding people to a rigid set of rules, we don't hold them to anything. We stand by and watch family members and friends make decisions and adopt lifestyles that are clearly in defiance of God's Word, and we smile sweetly and either say nothing at all or we say something that sounds sort of spiritual (like "just know I love you and want you to be happy") but in truth has the devastating effect of facilitating sinful behavior.

This spiritual bubble grows out of a distortion of Christian love and forgiveness, where in an effort not to be self-righteous or judgmental we throw out all standards of integrity and good judgment. No matter what evil or foolish thing someone does, we just "love" them and avoid any sort of confrontation that might appear critical of another person's choices.

In doing this, we think we are being loving and kind. We consider our tolerance of decisions that are directly contrary to God's Word to be a virtue, regardless of the destruction and hurt these actions may cause. Our spiritual bubble steadily expands as we "love" other people, and they seem so very pleased by our understanding and acceptance of beliefs and choices that are in absolute opposition to the teachings of Christ (although we try not to think about that part).

Then one day, we reap what we have sown. In our efforts to be tolerant and understanding, we abandoned the principles that make the Christian faith meaningful and effective, and we find ourselves and those we have surrounded ourselves with entirely devoid of the integrity necessary in order to withstand the true storms of life. A crisis hits, and we discover we are standing on the shifting sands of the world, instead of the solid rock that comes from an authentic relationship with Christ. Our world crumbles around us, and our bubbles burst.

Matthew 7:24-27 "Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine (*Jesus*) and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell – and great was its fall." (NASB)

Proverbs 1:22-33 "... How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge? Repent at my (*wisdom's*) rebuke! Then I will pour out my thoughts

to you, I will make known to you my teachings. But since you refuse to listen when I call and no one pays attention when I stretch out my hand, since you disregard all my advice and do not accept my rebuke... when calamity overtakes you like a storm, when disaster sweeps over you like a whirlwind, when distress and trouble overwhelm you... Then they will call to me but I will not answer; they will look for me but will not find me, since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the LORD. Since they would not accept my advice and spurned my rebuke, they will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes. For the waywardness of the simple will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them; but whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease, without fear of harm.” (NIV)

As we start to pick up the pieces of our broken lives, (if our hearts are humble) we come to the realization that all along we weren't really being loving. We were being cowardly and an enthusiastic participant in the ways of the fallen world. We were avoiding conflict and refusing to take an unpopular stand because we didn't want to take the heat that comes along with it. We valued relationships with others more than our relationship with Jesus, and we were quite happy to marginalize or altogether abandon His teachings in order to preserve and solidify our connection to a person or group. In the end, rather than helping them, we contributed to their destruction, because we facilitated their journey away from Christ.

This all relates to the ideas of forgiveness and accountability we looked at earlier in this chapter. In order to truly love someone as Jesus taught us to love, we must *both* forgive wrongs *and* hold people accountable for their decisions, by taking our stand and speaking the truth in love. It takes humility and wisdom to do this without becoming self-righteous or judgmental, but it's also impossible to effectively serve Christ without mastering this art.

2 Timothy 2:24-26 “The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses...” (NASB)

Luke 6:27-37 “But to you who are listening I (*Jesus*) say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the

ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” (NIV)

Luke 17:3,4 “... If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” (NASB)

Matthew 18:15-17 “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 5:1-13 “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate: A man is sleeping with his father’s wife. And you are proud! Shouldn’t you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this?... I (*Paul*) wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. ‘Expel the wicked person from among you.’ ” (NIV)

Proverbs 27:5,6 “Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.” (NIV)

Ephesians 4:25 “Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor...” (NIV)

Proverbs 28:23 “He who rebukes a man will afterward find more favor than he who flatters with the tongue.” (NASB)

Leviticus 19:17 “... Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt.” (NIV)

Galatians 6:1-10 “Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves. Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else, for each one should carry their own load... Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore,

as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” (NIV)

Colossians 3:12-17 “... put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another... Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.” (NASB)

Ephesians 4:1-32 “... live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love... to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it... to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work... put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. ‘In your anger do not sin’: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold... Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen... Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (NIV)

As we live our lives, each of us will develop our own unique series of spiritual bubbles. Some will come from our individual weaknesses. Others will come from the deceits of the world. All of them will eventually burst as the result of the crises they inevitably bring. But if we will learn from each experience, eventually we find that our spiritual bubbles become smaller and less frequent, until they cease to develop at all.

Each time a bubble bursts, we uncover all the falsehoods we have based our spiritual lives upon, and our path to God becomes more straight and true. We better understand God, ourselves, others, and the world, and we become more difficult to deceive. The process of bursting a spiritual bubble is painful and messy, and it leaves an open wound. But when the pain resides and the mess is washed clean and the

wound heals, what remains is something vibrant and healthy upon which true growth, service, and happiness can be built.

Spiritual crises will puncture any spiritual bubble that is full of anything other than a genuine relationship with our Heavenly Father. These crises will relentlessly attack every bubble as it pops up, until there are no more to be found. Crises still may arise in our lives, but there will be no spiritual bubbles to burst. Instead, they will be met by a relationship with our Creator that is authentic and alive. Rather than fragile men and women puffed up with the lies and deceits of the world, we are genuinely strong and filled with what it is we all ultimately long for in this life.

Psalm 57:1-11 “Have mercy on me, my God, have mercy on me, for in you I take refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings... My heart, O God, is steadfast... I will sing and make music. Awake, my soul! Awake, harp and lyre! I will awaken the dawn. I will praise you, Lord, among the nations; I will sing of you among the peoples. For great is your love, reaching to the heavens; your faithfulness reaches to the skies. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth.” (NIV)

Psalm 33:1-22 “Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him... For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does... We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. May your unfailing love be with us, LORD, even as we put our hope in you.” (NIV)

We are: Filled with Joy inexpressible and Peace surpassing comprehension.

At some place on earth, at some point in time, we are born into the fallen world.

Depending on where and when we enter this life, we grow up influenced by a multitude of factors. Our upbringing may be in an environment of peace or war, in a religious or secular home, with good or bad (or no) parents to care for us, in luxury or poverty. Physically we may be strong or weak, gifted or unremarkable, beautiful or plain. The variations are endless.

What we all share, however, regardless of these influences, is an innate, divinely inspired knowledge that God is and God cares. God places this knowledge in our hearts as soon as we reach an age where we are mentally able to comprehend it. This is the Common Grace we looked at in Chapter 5.

As we get older, the beauty and sadness we experience in the world (as described earlier in this study) will have a profound effect, shaping us like the forces of wind and water on stone. Both abrade us in unique ways over time, carving our life-stories into our being. But just as the impact of wind and water on stone varies depending on the type of stone being effected, the impact of beauty and sadness upon us is entirely dependent upon what we are made of; that is, what is in our hearts.

If our hearts are humble and our desire is for the light of God, the beauty and even the sadness in the world will drive us towards Him. We will appreciate the beauty we encounter, and the awe it inspires will overflow in a longing to know and serve our Creator. The sadness we encounter will repel us from the world, and the pain it brings will push us towards our Heavenly Father seeking comfort and healing.

If our hearts are proud and our desire is for the darkness, the sadness and even the beauty in the world will drive us away from God. We will ultimately blame God (instead of mankind's sinfulness) for the sadness we encounter, and the bitterness this inspires will propel us down any number of destructive paths. And the beauty in the world will become one of two things – a temporary distraction we become addicted to, or something we resent because it reminds us of the holy, loving Creator we have defied.

Said another way, when we choose to love God, He “works all things together for good” (Romans 8:28), and this includes both the beauty and the sadness we experience in our lives. God uses both of these forces to shape us into the men and women He wants us to be. Beauty inspires us. It helps us sense God's presence, and it rewards faithfulness. Sadness tests us. It helps us grow and then serve God, as we meet every challenge with faith, hope, and love.

As we have seen, faith, hope, and love create Joy and Peace. Acts of faith (trusting God to keep His Word) fill us with hope and love, which drive out fear and hate. This purges us from everything that inhibits Joy and Peace. We are no longer proud, with a defiant desire for the things of the world's darkness. We have humbled ourselves, and our faithful desire is to be filled with (and indeed to become) God's light.

Faith transforms our hearts, from self-absorbed to selfless. Hope transforms our minds, from self-deceived to discerning. And love transforms our behavior, from self-indulgent to serving God and others. We become God's servants, the instruments through which He brings light and grace into a fallen world, and in return we receive from Him the gift of Joy “inexpressible” and Peace “surpassing comprehension.”

This Joy and Peace is something we experience regardless of our circumstances, whether they are full of blessing or hardship. When we understand who God is, and we are confident we are doing His will, then we can be joyful and peace-filled, even in our darkest hour, because we know (among many other truths):

- God has a purpose in all things.
- He works all things together for good.

- He will never test us more than we are able to bear.
- He rewards those who seek Him.
- In eternity, He will make all things new and all things right.

As we start to grasp the enormity of these foundational truths and genuinely embrace them, despite all the distractions and assaults of the world, our faith fills our minds with hope that spills over into acts of love, and together these things fill us with Joy and Peace.

Romans 15:13 “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him...” (NIV)

Hang ups – Material things, worthy things, and doubts.

If these foundational truths about God don’t bring us Joy and Peace (and we are not dealing with issues of unrepentant sin or grievances against God), the reason is often because we are hung up on something that seems greater to us than these extraordinary promises. The usual culprits are: *material things, worthy things, and doubts.*

Sometimes, we just can’t imagine knowing Joy and Peace in this life without possessing a full helping of the material things. We want money, fame, and/or power, and all that comes along with them. And without them, life seems dull and pointless.

But if we are seeking God, He will find a way to show us the emptiness of these things. He might give them to us, so we can experience the emptiness firsthand. Or He might give them to someone we know, so we can learn it through their experiences. Or He might use the many scriptures that convey the powerful truth we must all come to accept: Material things cannot purchase immaterial things – like Joy and Peace.

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 “I (Solomon, perhaps the most powerful and wealthy man to ever live) said to myself, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself.’ And behold, it too was futility... I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; I made gardens and parks for myself, and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees... I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. Also, I collected for myself silver and gold, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself... the pleasures of men – many concubines. Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem... And all that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure... I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.” (NASB)

Ephesians 4:18,19 “They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Matthew 6:19-21 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (NIV)

Hebrews 13:5,6 “Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, ‘I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER FORSAKE YOU,’ so that we confidently say, ‘THE LORD IS MY HELPER, I WILL NOT BE AFRAID. WHAT WILL MAN DO TO ME?’ ” (NASB)

1 Timothy 6:7-19 “For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it... Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs... pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith... Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.” (NIV)

Sometimes, we want to hang our hopes for happiness upon things that are more worthy, like marrying an amazing person, or raising wonderful children, or completing some undeniably worthwhile project or mission. And while all of these things are truly commendable, what we must grow to learn is: Despite their worth, they can't make us happy. They may be vehicles through which happiness can be expressed, but they cannot in and of themselves bring us Joy and Peace. Only a relationship with God can do that.

All too often these worthy things sneak up on our list of priorities until they take precedence over the more important and fundamental priorities of simply knowing and walking with God. They become false idols we worship ahead of Him, and inevitably they fail us when we look to them to complete our being. People (even spouses and children) and projects (even the most meaningful) cannot complete our being; only God can do that. Yet once we let Him, then we can truly become worthy spouses, parents, and contributors to God's kingdom.

Proverbs 16:2 “All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, but the LORD weighs the motives.” (NASB)

1 Samuel 16:7 "... for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." (NASB)

1 Corinthians 13:3 "And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor... but do not have love, it profits me nothing." (NASB)

Philippians 1:15-18 "It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so out of love... The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition... But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I (*Paul*) rejoice..." (NIV)

Romans 10:2,3 "... they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness." (NIV)

Galatians 4:18 "It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good..." (NIV)

Matthew 10:37-39 "Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me (*Jesus*) is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it." (NIV)

Colossians 3:15-17 "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts... Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another... Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father." (NASB)

Colossians 1:9-12 "... be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light." (NASB)

Finally, we sometimes get hung up by doubt. We really like the way these truths about God sound, but we can't quite bring ourselves to totally embrace them. Maybe we can do it when life is good, but rarely when life becomes dark and difficult.

Doubt is a curious thing. A certain amount of doubt is understandable in a fallen world, where we are confronted by so many deceits from so many different sources. But many times doubt is an extremely useful, self-serving device for us to employ when we don't like what we hear from God and prefer to take a different path of our own choosing. For example, rather than come to our rescue, God calls us to persevere in times of distress, and suddenly we doubt all the promises that call us to endure, and we find convenient means to rescue ourselves that are not in keeping with God's Word.

As we just saw, the way to deal with doubt is to speak truthfully to God about it, allow Him to truthfully answer, and trust Him no matter what. When we do, God

eventually finds a way soothe the uncertainty of our doubts and prove His faithfulness to us. He is holy, and He is love. He can act no other way.

James 1:2-8 “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.” (NIV)

Luke 24:38 “And He (*Jesus*) said to them (*His disciples, after the resurrection*), ‘Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?’ ” (NASB)

Hebrews 3:12,13 “See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” (NIV)

John 20:24-29 “Now Thomas... one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came (*after the resurrection*). So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord!’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.’ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.’ Thomas said to him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ Then Jesus told him, ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’ ” (NIV)

Hebrews 10:22,23 “let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings... Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.” (NIV)

Lamentations 3:21-25 “This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. The LORD’S lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. ‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I have hope in Him.’ The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him.” (NASB)

Psalms 146:5,6 “Blessed are those... whose hope is in the LORD their God. He is the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them — he remains faithful forever.” (NIV)

Isaiah 40:31 “but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” (NIV)

Ephesians 1:18,19 “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe...” (NASB)

Over time, God addresses all of the “hang ups” in our lives that prevent us from fully placing our trust in Him. When we choose to seek Him, He patiently and faithfully reveals His character to us, until we can fully appreciate the foundational truths about Him that are so important if we want to know true happiness. And it is through this *process* we come to know Joy “inexpressible” and Peace “surpassing comprehension.”

The myths and the process.

There are certain myths surrounding the pursuit of happiness, and we have already looked at some of them in this study. We’ve seen how true happiness (that is, Joy and Peace) is not something we find when we reach a certain goal – like getting married, or becoming a parent, or reaching financial independence, or becoming famous. It’s not something we are able to swoop down and claim once we finally arrive at some imagined destination. Happiness is a state of being that travels with us wherever we go.

Psalm 23:4-6 “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me... Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.” (NASB)

Habakkuk 3:17-19 “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength...” (NIV)

Philippians 4:4-20 “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!... Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me (*Paul*), practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you... for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me... And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen.” (NASB)

Psalm 107:2-43 “Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story... they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way... Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind, for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the

hungry with good things... they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness, the utter darkness, and broke away their chains. Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds... tell of his works with songs of joy... Let the one who is wise heed these things and ponder the loving deeds of the LORD.” (NIV)

So often we think, “I’ll be happy when...” and we fill in the blank with any number of goals, most of which are perfectly legitimate. But the truth is: True happiness is not to be found in any of these goals. It can only be found in a *relationship* with God that is real and alive. *And that’s available to you right now, wherever you are!* In a sense, happiness not something we *go out and attain*. It’s something we *stand still and receive* as a result of faith, hope, and love. And then it comes with us wherever we go, whether it is towards great victories or terrible disappointments.

Happiness is not about getting or reaching or becoming. It’s about receiving the Joy “inexpressible” and Peace “surpassing comprehension” that flow from knowing and walking with our holy, loving God, whether that walk is down a beautiful country lane or into a dark, uncertain valley. It has absolutely nothing to do with our circumstances; that is, the nature of our walk. It has everything to do with our relationship; that is, whom we are walking with.

All too often we want our circumstances to change so we can be happy. But what we must come to realize is that circumstances are ultimately superficial and always transitory, while our relationship with God touches us at the deepest level and is permanently grounded in Christ. And knowing that God has a purpose in all things, and works all things together for good, and will never test us more than we can endure, and rewards faithfulness, and will one day make all things new and right (among many other foundational truths) gives us reason to know inexpressible Joy and surpassing Peace, even in our darkest hours.

What needs to change when we are unhappy is not our *circumstances in the world*, but rather our *connection to God*. If we are unhappy, ultimately the reason is not our circumstances. Unhappiness is caused by a failure to trust God that short-circuits our relationship with Him. And the only way to restore that connection is with faith, and the hope and love that faith brings.

There is no “magic pill” we can swallow once and thereafter know unfailing happiness. We often wish there was, and there are lots of people out there trying to sell you and me a dose, and most of them are getting very rich. But we have to learn to think of Joy and Peace, not as something we gain from *one act or decision* that thereafter lasts a lifetime, but rather as a *process* that is renewed day by day as we make a series of decisions over a lifetime to walk in harmony with the One who made us.

Joy and Peace are things we can know and experience *right now*, if we will learn and embrace the truths God has revealed in His Word. They are not something to gloomily long for in some far off time and place. They are something to receive *this instant*, with enthusiasm, gratitude, humility, and awe.

Then *retaining* this Joy and Peace becomes a process of living each moment as it comes through faith, hope, and love. Indeed, our Joy and Peace will grow and expand in every dimension over time as we meet the different challenges of life with God by our side, and He leads us through every twist and turn, every delight and heartache.

It's interesting to note we often want salvation to come from a series of decisions made over a lifetime (that is, through a lifetime of good works), and happiness to come from one decision that will last for the rest of our lives. But it's just the opposite.

Salvation comes from *one decision* to *receive* Jesus as Savior, because it could come no other way. We could never earn our salvation from a holy God by being really good throughout our lives. The price is just too high. So it's offered as a gift, from a loving God who desires no one to perish.

Happiness comes from *a series of decisions* to *follow* Jesus, because it could likewise come no other way. We could never experience a lifetime of happiness from one decision or act, because all of our decisions have an impact on our Joy and Peace. We can't down a bottle of spiritual snake oil, then go do whatever we want and expect to be happy. Arrogant, selfish people are never happy. That prize belongs only to the servants of the living God.

The prize.

In Chapter 5 we first looked at our spiritual birth and our spiritual birthright. When we accept Jesus as our Savior, we are born into the family of God. We are a "new creation." This is what the Bible speaks of when it says we must be "born again." We have a second, spiritual birth, where we become a child of God the moment we receive Jesus as our Savior.

2 Corinthians 5:17,18 "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ..." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

John 3:3-6 "Jesus answered and said to him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God... That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.'" (NASB)

1 Peter 1:23 "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. (NIV)

1 John 3:1-24 “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!... This is how we know who the children of God are... Anyone who does not do what is right is not God’s child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister. For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another... This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth... this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. The one who keeps God’s commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.” (NIV)

After being spiritually reborn into the family of God, we are entitled to a spiritual birthright as a child of God. These are things that are our right to claim by virtue of the family to which we belong. God is our Father. We are His children. And as His children, we share in His inheritance.

1 Peter 1:3,4 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope... to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you,” (NASB)

Colossians 3:23,24 “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.” (NIV)

This birthright or inheritance has temporal aspects and eternal aspects. During this life, we have the right to know Joy and Peace in a fallen world. No matter what this world throws at us, whether it is the world’s finest or its most vile, we can live our lives with passion and contentment, because this is the immutable gift of God to His children during their sojourn on earth.

Isaiah 58:11-14 “The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail... not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance...” (NIV)

Psalms 62:1-12 “My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken... Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken. My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in him

at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge... One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong, and that you, O Lord, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Isaiah 26:3,4 “The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect peace, because he trusts in You. Trust in the LORD forever, for in GOD the LORD, we have an everlasting Rock.” (NASB)

Philippians 4:11-20 “I (*Paul*) have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me... And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 7:4 “... in all our troubles my (*Paul's*) joy knows no bounds.” (NIV)

In eternity, when God makes all things new and all things right, the inheritance of the children of God includes blessings that are presently beyond our ability to comprehend. We literally cannot imagine the greatness of the blessings God has in store for His kids when they finally arrive to meet their Father and live with Him forever. Throughout this study, we have caught glimpses of what these blessings might be. In the Coda, we will look deeper.

Romans 8:18 “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 4:17,18 “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 2:9 “but just as it is written, ‘THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.’ ” (NASB)

Other than to ask to receive it, there are no conditions placed upon our spiritual birth; that is, on our salvation. If we will simply tell God that we believe Jesus died on the cross for our sins and ask Jesus to be our Savior, our sins are forgiven and we are made righteous in God’s eyes as a free gift, and nothing can take this gift away from us. We are immediately born into the family of God, and nothing can change that, just as nothing can change the bonds of blood that tie together members of an earthly family.

Romans 6:23 “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NASB)

Acts 16:31 “... Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved...” (NIV)

Ephesians 2:8,9 “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 1:21-24 “Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come... because it is by faith you stand firm.” (NIV)

Ephesians 1:13,14 “And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance...” (NIV)

Romans 8:33-39 “Who will bring a charge against God’s elect?... Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NASB)

2 Timothy 2:13 “If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.” (NASB)

Our spiritual birthright is different. There are conditions placed upon whether we receive our birthright. Just as an earthly inheritance often comes with certain conditions or obligations before it may be claimed, our spiritual inheritance carries with it a definite precondition before we can receive it. And as we have seen, that precondition is: Holiness. We must live holy lives, by emulating the love of Jesus for God and our fellow mankind. Without this, we will never know Joy and Peace in this life, and we will never receive the rewards God so greatly desires to bestow upon us in eternity.

Isaiah 58:13,14 “If you keep... from doing as you please... not going your own way... then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance...” (NIV)

Ephesians 5:1,2 “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave Himself up for us...” (NASB)

Colossians 1:9-12 “... be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.” (NASB)

Hebrews 6:10-12 “God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him... We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.” (NIV)

1 Peter 1:13-22 “Therefore, prepare you minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As

obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.”... Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Hebrews 12:1-17 “... let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood... Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ‘Make level paths for your feet,’ so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done.” (NIV)

The prize of our birthright is indescribably valuable. It is simply beyond price! How could we ever put a price tag on knowing true Joy and true Peace, and eternal rewards beyond imagining?

Actually, we do that all the time. The price is a bowl of porridge.

Birthright for porridge.

The father of the Jewish race was Abraham, who lived circa 2000 BC. His son by Sarah was Isaac, and Isaac had two sons, Jacob and Esau. You may remember the story of how Esau sold his birthright to Jacob, told in Genesis 25.

Genesis 25:27-34 “The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents. Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah (*Isaac’s wife*) loved Jacob. Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. He said to Jacob, ‘Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I’m famished!’... Jacob replied, ‘First sell me your birthright.’ ‘Look, I am about to die,’ Esau said. ‘What good is the birthright to me?’ But Jacob said, ‘Swear to me first.’ So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright.” (NIV)

In ancient cultures, the eldest male child received his family's "birthright," an inheritance of nearly all the father owned that was not split with the other siblings. It was an honor bestowed upon the first-born son. It was extremely valuable, and envied by the other children.

In this story, Esau comes along after a few days of unsuccessful hunting, and he's really hungry. He smells the stew his brother is cooking (most likely a simple bean or pea based porridge), and he wants some. Jacob wants something too – the birthright – so he proposes a trade. Now Esau says he is about to die and he just has to have some of that stew, and in his mind he may honestly believe this, but it's highly unlikely. He didn't have to have the stew right then and there. He presumably could have held out a little bit longer and gone to his mom, dad, friend, or neighbor for something to eat. But he becomes very shortsighted and chooses to trade the most valuable thing he has for that one bowl of porridge. And his brother Jacob is all too happy to oblige.

Sometimes we think there is little we can learn from these stories of ancient times in the Bible, but they are actually full of insight into human nature, and human nature remains remarkably consistent throughout the centuries. We are *exactly* like Esau. We are the possessors of an indescribably valuable spiritual birthright, but as we travel through life our desires build up inside us until we have worked up a voracious appetite. Then something or someone within this fallen world crosses our path and offers to fulfill those desires, and all we have to do to satisfy them is give up one little thing – our birthright as the children of God.

What the world offers us are the temporary distractions from unhappiness we have looked at in this study, things like promiscuous sex, drugs, alcohol, wealth, fame, power, and even perfectly natural desires like marriage and children. And there are times in our lives when we legitimately think that if we don't satisfy our burning desire for these things we are going to die. So we make the trade. We compromise our holy character to get what we want, and we lose our birthright: Joy and Peace in a fallen world, and eternal blessing beyond imagination.

Like Esau, we convince ourselves we will die without these things, but the truth is we won't. We just need to be *patient*, go to our Heavenly Father, and ask for the things that are in keeping with His plan, and at the right time God will give them to us. But so often we "despise" our birthright, just like Esau, and place no value on the most valuable thing we possess. We make the trade with the world. It takes away our birthright, and we indulge ourselves in something that temporarily abates our hunger, until it quickly wears off and leaves us burning for more. Jacob took advantage of his foolish brother, and enticed him into trading something extremely valuable and permanent for something extremely cheap and temporary. The world does the same thing to us every day.

Romans 16:17,19 “I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people... I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil.” (NIV)

Psalms 37:3-40 “Trust in the LORD and do good... Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He will do it. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light... Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him... the humble will... delight themselves in abundant prosperity... the LORD sustains the righteous. The LORD knows the days of the blameless, and their inheritance will be forever... Wait for the LORD and keep His way, and He will exalt you... the salvation of the righteous is from the LORD; He is their strength in time of trouble. The LORD helps them and delivers them; He delivers them from the wicked and saves them, because they take refuge in Him.” (NASB)

Snares & Footholds.

In order to steal our birthright, this world often makes use of two very effective devices: Snares and Footholds. A *snare* is something that trips us up and causes us to stumble as we journey towards God’s plan and purpose for our lives. A *foothold* is something sinful we allow within our souls that acts as a secure fortress from which evil can spread and consume the rest of us. A snare will knock us down, and while we lie dazed and confused on the ground, it tries to worm its way inside us in order to establish a foothold that will be difficult to dislodge. If we don’t identify it and pull it out by the roots, it eventually goes on campaign and conquers our thoughts, words, and deeds.

The three plagues we looked at earlier in this chapter are good examples of snares and footholds. Regret for the past, fear of the future, and daily addictions all cause us to stumble. Then if left unchecked they become entrenched in our souls and slowly envelop us. Sins such as anger, bitterness, jealousy, lust, and greed (along with many others) are usually an important part of the mix as well. If we do not resist these things, they become entwined in the fabric of our being, bring us to our knees, and destroy us.

Hebrews 12:14-17 “Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done.” (NIV)

Proverbs 29:6,25 “Evildoers are snared by their own sin, but the righteous shout for joy and are glad... Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe.” (NIV)

Psalms 106:6-39 “We have sinned, even as our ancestors did; we have done wrong and acted wickedly... They did not destroy the peoples (*in the Promised Land*) as the LORD had commanded them, but they mingled with the nations and adopted their customs. They worshiped their idols, which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to false gods. They shed innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan, and the land was desecrated by their blood. They defiled themselves by what they did; by their deeds they prostituted themselves.” (NIV)

Ephesians 4:1-32 “... live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love... to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it... to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work... put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. ‘In your anger do not sin’: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold... Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen... Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (NIV)

Titus 3:1-8 “Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every consideration for all men. For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us... concerning these things I want you to speak confidently, so that those who have believed God will be careful to engage in good deeds. These things are good and profitable for men.” (NASB)

2 Timothy 2:22-26 “Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Don’t have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must

be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.”

(NIV)

1 Timothy 6:4-10 “they are conceited and understand nothing. They have an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between people of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain. But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”

(NIV)

The key to defeating a snare is: *Avoid stepping into it in the first place.* Once your foot touches a snare, the contest is over. The trap springs and the snare wins every time. Now you can only struggle to get out. So we have to learn to identify the trap and maneuver around it before it's too late.

Our partners in this operation are the light of God's Word and the guidance of God's Spirit. God's Word illuminates our path and God's Spirit takes us by the hand and leads us around the obstacles. The snares of the fallen world are not ordinarily easy to identify. They are by their very nature deceitful and enticing. God's Word and Spirit work together to grant us the wisdom we need to recognize and avoid them.

2 Corinthians 4:4 “... the god of this world (*Satan*) has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ...” (NASB)

Romans 16:17,18 “... watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.” (NIV)

2 Peter 2:9-22 “... the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority... self-willed... these, like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge... suffering wrong as the wages of doing wrong. They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are stains and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, as they carouse with you; having eyes full of adultery and that never cease from sin; enticing unstable souls, having a heart trained in greed... forsaking the right way they have gone astray... These are springs without water and mists driven by a storm, for whom the black darkness has

been reserved. For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desire, by sensuality... promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved. For if after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment delivered to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, 'A DOG RETURNS TO ITS OWN VOMIT,' and, 'A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire.' " (NASB)

Psalm 119:9-133 "How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you... I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word... strengthen me according to your word. Keep me from deceitful ways... I run in the path of your commands, for you have broadened my understanding... Teach me, LORD, the way of your decrees, that I may follow it to the end... Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight. Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain. Turn my eyes away from worthless things... Teach me knowledge and good judgment, for I trust your commands. Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word... The law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold... Your word, LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens... I have kept my feet from every evil path... I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path. Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path... The wicked have set a snare for me, but I have not strayed from your precepts. Your statutes are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart... You are my refuge and my shield; I have put my hope in your word... I love your commands more than gold, more than pure gold, and because I consider all your precepts right, I hate every wrong path... The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple... Direct my footsteps according to your word; let no sin rule over me." (NIV)

Colossians 2:2-4 "... be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments." (NIV)

Psalm 119:165 "Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble." (NIV)

If we step into a snare and stumble, it's important to get right back up, brush ourselves off, move on, and leave the snare behind. Everyone falls into some sort of trap during their lifetime. We all have our weaknesses, and so, as we have seen, failure is inevitable. That's life in a fallen world.

But failure doesn't have to keep us down forever. Because of who Jesus is and what He did on the cross, we can immediately be forgiven for our failures and continue on our journey towards His plan and purpose. God understands we are flesh and blood, prone to stray from His path, and so He has given us Jesus, the good shepherd, to rescue and guide us, if we will choose to follow His voice.

Hebrews 12:1-13 "... let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith... FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES... God deals with you as with sons; for what son is their whom his father does not discipline?... All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed." (NASB)

Philippians 3:13,14 "... forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." (NASB)

1 John 1:9 "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (NASB)

Psalms 32:5 "I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD'; and You forgave the guilt of my sin." (NASB)

Isaiah 1:18-20 "'Come now, and let us reason together,' says the LORD, 'though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool. If you consent and obey... Truly, the mouth of the LORD has spoken.' " (NASB)

Psalms 103:8-18 "The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love... he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children – with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts." (NIV)

Jeremiah 3:12-15 "... I will not look upon you in anger. For I am gracious... Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the LORD your God... Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding." (NASB)

John 10:2-28 "... the shepherd of the sheep... goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a

stranger's voice... I (*Jesus*) have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand." (NIV)

If we don't recover quickly after falling into a snare, all too often whatever sin caused us to stumble takes root in our hearts and gains a strong foothold. It becomes a habit that is addictive. And then we must begin a long and costly battle to overcome and drive out these destructive behaviors.

Hebrews 12:14,15 "Pursue peace with all men... See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled;" (NASB)

Psalm 73:21-26 "When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." (NIV)

The key to defeating a foothold is: *An all-out, sustained assault that doesn't end until the foothold is defeated, abandoned and destroyed.* Whatever foothold is within you must be identified, isolated, and wholly excised. It must be removed from your soul like a cancer from the body.

Psalm 139:1-24 "O LORD, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You understand my thought from afar. You scrutinize my path and my lying down, and are intimately acquainted with all my ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O LORD, You know it all... For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother's womb... Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way." (NASB)

Psalm 51:10-19 "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me... For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it... The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise... Then You will delight in righteous sacrifices..." (NASB)

Psalm 51:1-7 "Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin... Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow." (NASB)

Isaiah 1:13-20 " 'I (*the Lord*) cannot endure iniquity... So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you, yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen... Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove

the evil of your deeds from My sight... Come now, and let us reason together,' says the LORD, 'though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool. If you consent and obey... Truly, the mouth of the LORD has spoken.' ” (NASB)

James 4:1-10 “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God... Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded... Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 10:3-5 “For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” (NIV)

The steps we looked at in overcoming addictions are very important in rooting out a foothold, as our addictions and these footholds are in many ways the same thing. Relying day by day on the “manna” of God, to keep a foothold deserted and empty is also important. Let’s look at some examples.

Perhaps we have a tendency towards anger. Our fuse is short, and when something rubs us the wrong way we tend to explode. That is a snare that can get us into all kinds of trouble, and we have to learn to control our anger in order to avoid all the problems it can create.

Psalm 37:8 “Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret — it leads only to evil.” (NIV)

Proverbs 22:24,25 “Do not make friends with a hot-tempered person, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may learn their ways and get yourself ensnared.” (NIV)

If we don’t avoid the snare, our short fuse turns into a deep foothold that eventually leads to a personality dominated by bitterness. We look upon everything through a lens of hostility and sourness that taints every aspect of our lives. We become addicted to anger, and rely upon the satisfaction we get from its aggression as a way to distract us from anything that might challenge our distorted beliefs and impulsive behaviors. It then takes a tremendous amount of humility and a daily commitment to

tame the outbursts we have become addicted to and root out their underlying cause – an unchecked anger that childishly lashes out at anything that displeases us.

Proverbs 29:22 “An angry person stirs up conflict, and a hot-tempered person commits many sins.” (NIV)

Ecclesiastes 7:9 “Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools.” (NIV)

Of course things like alcohol, drugs, and promiscuous sex make dangerously effective snares and footholds, as does an aberrant need for fame, power, or money. These things are clearly negative, and are fairly easy to identify as damaging. However, worthy things – like a desire for marriage, children, or a meaningful career – can also become snares and footholds when we are willing to compromise our integrity in order to get them. They become unhealthy obsessions, rather than legitimate goals, and there is no end to the wrongs we will commit in our quest to possess them. And so it is very important to carefully examine those things we long for and depend upon, and the way we pursue them, to see if they aid us in our walk with God or camouflage a snare or hidden foothold.

Guilt, the power of praise, and the rightful place of “feelings.”

Another common and potentially devastating snare and foothold that deserves special attention is: Guilt.

Feelings of guilt can be a two edged sword, with both good qualities and bad qualities. On the good side, we absolutely should feel guilty after we do something wrong. Our conscience should sting a little bit or a lot, depending on the severity of our sin. If it doesn't, then that's a sign of a hard heart. As we have seen earlier in this study, we want to keep our hearts tender, so they are sensitive to God's leading, and feelings of guilt after doing wrong are a part of how God communicates with us. A guilty conscience is a message from God that we are on the wrong path.

Acts 24:16 “So I (*Paul*) strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.” (NIV)

2 Samuel 24:10 “David was conscience-stricken after he had... sinned greatly...” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 7:10,11 “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done...” (NIV)

Romans 2:9-11 “There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil... but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good... For there is no partiality with God.” (NASB)

Isaiah 1:4 “Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Isaiah 59:4-8 “No one calls for justice; no one pleads his case with integrity. They rely on empty arguments and speak lies; they conceive trouble and give birth to evil... Their deeds are evil deeds... Their thoughts are evil thoughts; ruin and destruction mark their ways. The way of peace they do not know; there is no justice in their paths. They have turned them into crooked roads; no one who walks in them will know peace.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Jeremiah 8:5-17 “Why then have these people turned away?... They cling to deceit; they refuse to return. I have listened attentively, but they do not say what is right. None of them repent of their wickedness, saying, ‘What have I done?’ Each pursues their own course like a horse charging into battle... Since they have rejected the word of the LORD, what kind of wisdom do they have?... They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. ‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace. Are they ashamed of their detestable conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush. So they will fall among the fallen; they will be brought down when they are punished, says the LORD... ‘See, I will send venomous snakes among you, vipers that cannot be charmed, and they will bite you,’ declares the LORD.” (NIV)

2 Chronicles 34:27 “Because your heart was tender and you humbled yourself before God when you heard His words... and because you humbled yourself before Me... I truly have heard you,” declares the LORD.” (NASB)

But God loves us with an infinite, absolute love, and He emphatically does not want us burdened throughout our lives by feelings of guilt. Guilt can become one of the heaviest burdens we find ourselves carrying in this life, with a tremendous power to weigh us down and hold us back. It crushes and immobilizes the spirit, which in turn prevents us from growing. This is the negative, destructive side of guilt.

Psalms 38:1-8 “LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath... there is no soundness in my bones because of my sin. My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear... I am bowed down and brought very low... I am feeble and utterly crushed; I groan in anguish of heart.” (NIV)

Proverbs 12:25 “Anxiety in a man’s heart weighs it down...” (NASB)

1 Timothy 4:2 “... hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.” (NASB)

1 Samuel 25:28-31 “... Let no wrongdoing be found in... my master... and... my master will not have on his conscience the staggering burden of needless bloodshed or of having avenged himself...” (NASB – 1984 ed.)

God wants guilty feelings to motivate us to get back on the right path. But once we make the decision to return to Him, then God wants us to toss those guilty feelings in

a ditch along life's road and leave them there, so we can move forward into His plan, released of our burdens and filled with Joy and Peace.

Hebrews 12:1-13 "... let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith... strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed." (NASB)

Philippians 3:13,14 "... forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." (NASB)

Jeremiah 31:2-34 "This is what the LORD says: '... I have loved you with an everlasting love... I will build you up again... I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow...' After I strayed, I repented; after I came to understand, I beat my breast. I was ashamed and humiliated... This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says:... 'I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.' " (NIV)

Jeremiah 33:2-11 "This is what the LORD says, he who made the earth, the LORD who formed it and established it... 'Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know... I will bring health and healing... I will heal my people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security. I... will rebuild them... I will cleanse them from all the sin they have committed against me and will forgive all their sins of rebellion against me... they will be in awe and will tremble at the abundant prosperity and peace I provide... there will be heard once more the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, and the voices of those who bring thank offerings to the house of the LORD, saying, "Give thanks to the LORD Almighty, for the LORD is good; his love endures forever..." ' " (NIV)

How exactly do we do that? Guilt can be one of the most difficult things in life to release, because when we try to let it go, we often feel like we are leaving something important unredressed. And sometimes it seems to cling to us like a parasite, or haunt us like a vengeful ghost.

If you have guilty feelings about something you have done, try this:

Examine carefully what you have done that makes you feel guilty, and discover whether you are truly to blame. Most of the time, we are truly to blame. We all sin and fall short of the glory of God, and there is plenty to feel guilty about. But sometimes this world deceives us, and tries to make us feel guilty for things that were not our fault. This is often the case for things that happened in our childhood. Prayerfully and humbly ask God for the wisdom to know if your guilt is legitimate or misplaced. And if it's misplaced, ask God for the strength of mind to receive this truth and be relieved of your burden.

2 Corinthians 13:5 “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves...” (NIV)

Psalm 139:1-24 “O LORD, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You understand my thought from afar. You scrutinize my path and my lying down, and are intimately acquainted with all my ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O LORD, You know it all... For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother's womb... Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.” (NASB)

Psalm 26:1-3 “Vindicate me, LORD, for I have led a blameless life; I have trusted in the LORD and have not faltered. Test me, LORD, and try me, examine my heart and my mind; for I have always been mindful of your unfailing love and have lived in reliance on your faithfulness.” (NIV)

If you are to blame, look to see if your actions have hurt someone else. Carefully examine the ramifications of your decisions. Identify anyone you may have injured. Humbly ask God for the wisdom to understand how your actions affected the lives of others, and He will reveal it to you.

James 1:5 “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.” (NASB)

If you hurt someone, go to them, ask for forgiveness, and, if possible, make amends. Find anyone you injured. Tell them you are sorry for what you did. Ask them to forgive you. And if there is any way, show them you are sorry by somehow making amends. Your actions will speak much louder than your words!

Numbers 5:6,7 “Any man or woman who wrongs another in any way and so is unfaithful to the LORD is guilty and must confess the sin they have committed. They must make full restitution for the wrong they have done...” (NIV)

Matthew 5:23,24 “Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.” (NASB)

Luke 19:1-9 “Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.’ So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, ‘He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.’ But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, ‘Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of

anything, I will pay back four times the amount.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house...’ ” (NIV)

Sometimes how to make amends is really obvious, and sometimes it may seem impossible. Humbly and genuinely ask God to show you how you can repair the damage you have done, and if there is any way, God will be happy to oblige. God loves it when we do this! It’s how He wants His children to behave, so it is His great delight to assist us when we are not sure of what to do.

And note that while you can ask someone for forgiveness, you can’t make them forgive you, so you shouldn’t try. They may be dealing with very deep hurts they will have to work through, and it may take time before they are ready to forgive. Or they may never forgive you at all. But that’s not your problem! You can’t control them, nor are you responsible for them. You are only in control of yourself, and therefore you are only responsible for yourself. You just do what God calls you to do, leave the rest up to Him, and He will do whatever is in keeping with His perfect plan.

Romans 12:18 “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.” (NASB)

Now that you’ve dealt with your relationship with other people, it’s time to deal with your relationship with God. But before you can do that effectively, and truly be relieved of the burden of guilt, you need to fully arm yourself with truth, and that means...

Get out your Bible and carefully read through every verse you can find on God’s love and forgiveness. You need to crack open your Bible and immerse yourself in God’s Word. You need to pull out all those verses that describe God’s infinite love, compassion, mercy, and kindness, and His immeasurable desire to forgive (and there are lots of them!); then consume and digest these scriptures like the spiritual food they are meant to be.

You have to be meticulous about this. You can’t gloss over this step. You have to carefully read through these verses and thoughtfully consider their true meaning, and let them wash out the darkness of your fears and doubts and fill you with the light of truth. If you don’t, you will never be able to defeat unhealthy feelings of guilt, because you will not have the weapons to do so.

There are hundreds of verses to choose from for this. Here are a few.

Psalm 32:5 “I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD’; and You forgave the guilt of my sin.” (NASB)

Jeremiah 3:12-15 “... I will not look upon you in anger. For I am gracious... Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the LORD your

God... Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding.” (NASB)

Isaiah 1:16-20 “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight... ‘Come now, and let us reason together,’ says the LORD, ‘though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool. If you consent and obey...’ Truly, the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (NASB)

Job 11:13-18 “... if you devote your heart to him (*God*)... if you put away the sin that is in your hand... then you will lift up your face without shame; you will stand firm and without fear... You will be secure, because there is hope...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Psalms 130:7 “... put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love...” (NIV)

Lamentations 3:21-25 “This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. The LORD’S lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. ‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I have hope in Him.’ The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him.” (NASB)

Lamentations 3:31-42 “For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone... Why should the living complain when punished for their sins? Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD. Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven, and say: ‘We have sinned and rebelled...’ ” (NIV)

Psalms 145:8-16 “The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made... The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does. The LORD upholds all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down... You (*God*) open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.” (NIV)

Psalms 32:1-11 “Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered...and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.’ And you forgave the guilt of my sin. Therefore let all the faithful pray to you while you may be found... Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD’S unfailing love surrounds the one who trusts in him. Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!” (NIV)

Psalms 103:8-18 “The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love... he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. The life of mortals is like

grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children – with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.” (NIV)

Jeremiah 15:19 “... If you repent, I (*God*) will restore you that you may serve me...” (NIV)

With these verses in mind, prayerfully confess your sin to God once, and make a personal record of it. Now that you have immersed yourself in the truth of God's Word, go somewhere you can be alone, and prayerfully confess your sin to God. Tell Him what you've done, humbly acknowledge that you know it was wrong, and ask Him to forgive you – once.

The “once” here is *very* important. From our human perspective, we often feel the need to confess a wrongdoing over and over, with great emotion, and beg to be forgiven over long periods of time. And how well we perform these acts determines whether the other person will forgive us.

It doesn't work that way with God. God does not forgive because of the intensity or longevity of our emotion, pleading, or guilty feelings, or because of good works we might do in an attempt to purchase our forgiveness. God forgives because His Son Jesus Christ paid the price for all of mankind's sin while He was on the cross. Period. Full stop. Nothing we could ever do, including our begging or bribing, could ever be enough to earn our forgiveness. But God understands this and loves us anyway! That's why Jesus was here – to do for us what we could never do for ourselves.

Isaiah 64:6 “... all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment...” (NASB)

Romans 3:23 “for all... fall short of the glory of God,” (NASB)

Psalms 143:2 “And do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no man living is righteous.” (NASB)

Revelation 15:4 “... For you (*God*) alone are holy...” (NIV)

Romans 3:10-22 “... There is no one righteous, not even one... All have turned away... Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe...” (NIV)

Romans 5:8 “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (NASB)

1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (NASB)

We saw early in this study that the word “confess” in 1 John 1:9 in the Greek is “homologeō.” This word has no emotional connotations. It simply means to cite or list something. And that's all God requires us to do in order to be forgiven – list our

sins to Him, and ask for His mercy and grace. Then He is faithful and just to forgive us, not because of what we have done, but because of what Jesus did, once and for all while on the cross of Calvary. This is not to say we can be flippant or cavalier about our sins. We should genuinely regret them. It's just an acknowledgment that it is Jesus' work on the cross, not our feelings of regret, which brings about our forgiveness.

1 Peter 3:18 “For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God...” (NASB)

1 John 2:2 “He (*Jesus*) is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 5:19 “... God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them...” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 5:15 “And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.” (NIV)

Colossians 1:19-20 “For God was pleased... through him (*Jesus*) to reconcile to himself all things... by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” (NIV)

After we have confessed a sin that burdens us with guilt, it's a good idea to make some sort of personal record of it, so we always have something to remind us of the time and place we took that particularly burdensome sin to the throne of grace and received forgiveness. You might jot something down in your Bible, or carve something into a rock, or plant a tree. If privacy is a concern, any words you use can be written in a way so they are understood only by you. But do *something* so you can have a *permanent* record of when God forgave you for the thing that troubles you so. You will need it when guilt tries to sneak back into your life.

Finally, when guilt returns to attack you, don't ask to be forgiven again; instead, consciously choose to praise God for already forgiving you. After you seek forgiveness from others, do your best to make amends, immerse yourself in God's Word, and confess your sins to God in prayer, you are probably going to feel pretty good. Most likely, you will experience relief from the burden of your guilt. (If you don't, see the discussion of “the rightful place of feelings” that follows.)

But as time passes, those feelings are going to wear off, and eventually another feeling is going to do its best to tiptoe back into your daily routine – your old nemesis of guilt. When this day inevitably arrives, here is where you have to do something radically different from what you have done before. Instead of dropping to your knees and fearfully begging once again to be forgiven for the terrible thing you did, drop to your knees and joyously praise God for already forgiving you!

Psalm 42:5-11 “Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you... By day the LORD directs his love, at night his song is with me — a prayer to the God of my

life... Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.”
(NIV)

Micah 7:18,19 “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression... You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.” (NIV)

Psalm 59:16,17 “But I will sing of your strength, in the morning I will sing of your love; for you are my fortress, my refuge in times of trouble. You are my strength, I sing praise to you; you, God, are my fortress, my God on whom I can rely.” (NIV)

Psalm 106:1-48 “Praise the LORD. Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. Who can proclaim the mighty acts of the LORD or fully declare his praise?... We have sinned, even as our ancestors did; we have done wrong and acted wickedly... Yet he saved them for his name’s sake, to make his mighty power known... Many times he delivered them, but they were bent on rebellion and they wasted away in their sin. Yet he took note of their distress when he heard their cry; for their sake he remembered his covenant and out of his great love he relented... Save us, LORD our God... that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise. Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting...” (NIV)

Psalm 145:1-21 “I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever. Every day I will praise you and extol your name for ever and ever. Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom. One generation commends your works to another... They celebrate your abundant goodness and joyfully sing of your righteousness. The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. All your works praise you, LORD... The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does. The LORD upholds all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down... You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing. The LORD is righteous in all his ways and faithful in all he does. The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them... My mouth will speak in praise of the LORD. Let every creature praise his holy name for ever and ever.” (NIV)

When guilt attacks, you are going to have to go back to all those verses that promise God forgave you when you confessed your sin to Him, and you are going to have to make a choice: Will you trust God to keep His Word, or will you doubt Him? It really comes down to that. Either you believe your Heavenly Father when He promises He forgave you, or you don’t.

Hebrews 10:22 “let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience...” (NIV)

If you don't trust God to keep His Word, then there is nothing you can do to keep guilt out of your life. You will be plagued by fear and its resulting misery to the end of your days. That is the terrible price of doubt. But if you will make the choice to trust Him, and demonstrate that trust through acts of praise and worship, then the power of guilt, fear, and doubt will be obliterated from your life.

There is tremendous power in praising and worshipping our Creator! True praise and worship are pure acts of faith that demonstrate unequivocally we trust God to keep His Word. When we are assaulted by guilt, or tested by adversity, or blindsided by tragedy, and we praise God (instead of curse or doubt Him) because we choose to stand firm on all of the promises that tell us God is and God cares, even when life turns dark and threatening, then there can be absolutely no doubt that we trust God. And that, at the end of the day, is all God really wants from us in this life – to simply and genuinely trust Him.

Psalm 100:1-5 “Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.” (NIV)

So when guilt knocks on your door, don't answer! Instead, go to that special place in your Bible, or to that carving in the rock, or to that tree you planted, and remember the time and place you confessed your sin to God. Read through all those glorious verses that declare the might and power of God's love and forgiveness, and His immeasurable desire to forgive and restore *you*. Then get down and praise Him for all you are worth!

Psalm 66:1-20 “Shout for joy to God, all the earth! Sing the glory of his name; make his praise glorious. Say to God, ‘How awesome are your deeds! So great is your power...’ Come and see what God has done, his awesome deeds for mankind!... Praise our God, all peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard; he has preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping. For you, God, tested us; you refined us like silver... we went through fire and water, but you brought us to a place of abundance... Come and hear, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me... I cried out to him with my mouth; his praise was on my tongue. If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God has surely listened and has heard my prayer. Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!” (NIV)

Now God created a lot of different kinds of people, and we all express ourselves differently. Some will praise God by jumping up and down with their hands raised in the air. Some will sing at the top of their lungs. Some will dance up a storm. Some

will find no other (or better) expression of praise than tears of gratitude. None of that really matters. What matters is that your worship of God is genuine and in keeping with how God made you, and that your acts of praise are based upon the truths contained in God's Word. Tell God you love Him, you trust Him, and you believe that He keeps His Word, and thank Him for the grace and mercy He has poured out upon you!

Psalm 149:1-9 “Praise the LORD. Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the assembly of his faithful people... Let them praise his name with dancing and make music to him with timbrel and harp. For the LORD takes delight in his people; he crowns the humble with victory. Let his faithful people rejoice in this honor and sing for joy on their beds. May the praise of God be in their mouths... this is the glory of all his faithful people. Praise the LORD.” (NIV)

Psalm 150:1-6 “Praise the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness. Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with timbrel and dancing, praise him with the strings and pipe, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD.” (NIV)

As you do these things, the guilt that came knocking is going to turn around and run like the devil from your doorstep. *Guilt cannot exist in the same place as praise*, after we have genuinely sought forgiveness from others and from God. As we have seen, faith (as demonstrated in praise) creates hope and love, which drives out fear and hate, and those things born of fear and hate, including guilt.

James 4:6-10 “... Scripture says: ‘God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.’ Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded... Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.” (NIV)

Guilt can be a tricky thing to deal with. On the one hand, it has a rightful place in our lives when we are rebelling against God, and it should be welcomed as a reminder we have strayed from Him. But on the other hand, it has no place in our lives when we are seeking God, and it should melt away as we praise God for the love and mercy He pours out upon His repentant children.

A great tragedy is that some associate Christianity with feelings of guilt. But if we clearly understand the faith, it should be totally the opposite! Jesus' message leads to an extraordinarily wonderful, life-changing liberation from sin and unhealthy feelings of guilt. For this we should all be exceedingly grateful, and our gratitude should then translate into an eagerness to share this message with a lost world that has been blinded and deceived.

John 8:31,32 "... Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'" (NIV)

2 Corinthians 3:17,18 "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we... are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (NIV)

Psalm 116:1-16 "I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live. The cords of death entangled me... I was overcome by distress and sorrow. Then I called on the name of the LORD... The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion... For you, LORD, have delivered me from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living. I trusted in the LORD... Truly I am your servant, LORD... you have freed me from my chains." (NIV)

Galatians 5:1-13 "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery... The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love... You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love..." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Isaiah 52:2-12 "Shake off your dust... Free yourself from the chains on your neck... Burst into songs of joy together... for the LORD has comforted his people... the LORD will go before you, the God of Israel will be your rear guard." (NIV)

Philemon 1:6 "... be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Guilt can become a particularly deceitful snare and foothold because repentance for wrongdoing *feels* spiritual, and indeed it is spiritual the first time we do it. It is exactly what God calls us to do when we sin. But where it becomes a problem is when we repent over and over for the same thing because we feel so guilty about it. Then this becomes a pseudo-spirituality that is in fact rebellion, because we are not accepting God's Word that He has already forgiven us.

Asking God to forgive us over and over for the same transgression is not pleasing to the Lord. It is sin. It is rejecting the grace that is clearly offered in God's Word, and substituting our own works as a means to appease a deity we have mistaken for someone who can be mollified by repeated acts of contrition. God isn't moved by that, because, as we have seen throughout this study, our works fall short. God is moved by the work of His Son Jesus Christ on the cross, which does not fall short, and He is moved by the love and praise of His other children who receive His grace with thankfulness and delight.

Deuteronomy 30:2-10 "and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul... then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you... the LORD your God will make you most prosperous in all the work of your hands... The LORD will again delight in you and make you prosperous... if you obey the

LORD your God and keep his commands and decrees... and turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.” (NIV)

Psalm 147:1-11 “Praise the LORD. How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him! The LORD ... heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds... Sing to the LORD with grateful praise; make music to our God... the LORD delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love.” (NIV)

In other words, we don't have to keep on begging God for forgiveness. We just have to ask Him once and mean it. Then God delights to forgive and forget. And He especially delights in our gratitude, and in the Joy and Peace we receive from our restored relationship with Him.

What God does not delight in is this: Someone who keeps on asking to be forgiven for the same thing over and over again, and each time God answers with a thundering “You are forgiven!” instead of getting a great big hug and thank you from His loving child, He gets yet another weepy request to be forgiven. It demonstrates that the child either doesn't really know and understand the Father, or it demonstrates that deep down inside the child doesn't really want to be forgiven, but instead wants to wallow in his or her sins and try somehow to earn forgiveness through repentant works.

One reason we tend to seek forgiveness over and over again for something that makes us feel guilty is that this is what is often required from our fellow mankind, so we mistakenly believe God works the same way. As we have seen, this is not the case. God's ways are not our ways. Ask Him once. Mean it. And because of who Jesus is and what He did on the cross, and because God loves you infinitely more than you will ever know, God will joyfully and permanently forgive.

Isaiah 55:6-9 “Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. ‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the LORD. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’” (NIV)

Ezekiel 18:21-32 “But if a wicked person turns away from all the sins they have committed... None of the offenses they have committed will be remembered against them... Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?... Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ Hear, you Israelites: Is my way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust?... I will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit...

For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!” (NIV)

Psalm 103:11-18 “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD’s love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children’s children – with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.” (NIV)

Isaiah 57:15,16 “For this is what the high and exalted One says – he who lives forever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. I will not accuse them forever, nor will I always be angry, for then they would faint away because of me – the very people I have created.’” (NIV)

Isaiah 1:18-20 “... ‘Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool. If you consent and obey’... Truly, the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (NASB)

Micah 7:18,19 “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression... You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.” (NIV)

Luke 15:7 “I (*Jesus*) tell you that... there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.” (NIV)

Colossians 1:19-20 “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him (*Jesus*), and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” (NIV)

Jude 1:24,25 “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.” (NASB)

Another reason we continue to plead over and over to be forgiven for something is that we just don’t *feel* forgiven, so we keep on asking with hopes that our feelings will change. The error here – and it is a devastating one – is that *we let our feelings determine our faith*. We base our perception of who we are and where we stand with God on our emotional state, rather than the promises in God’s Word. We lift a wetted finger in the air to see whither the winds of our feelings are blowing, and we wrongly interpret our spiritual fortunes depending on the answer.

Our emotional currents rush all over the place, and the forces that direct them are many and mysterious. Hormones, sleep patterns, diet, exercise (or the lack thereof),

prescription drugs, and various illnesses, along with compulsions from our subconscious that we don't even begin to understand, all contribute heavily to our feelings, and *none* of them relate directly to our relationship with God. They can *affect* our relationship with God, if we let them, but they cannot *determine* our relationship with God. This makes our feelings in and of themselves very unreliable and sometimes treacherous guides in spiritual matters.

What determines our relationship with God are our *choices* – choices to seek God, learn about Him, receive His grace, and serve Him. These choices make up our faith; that is, what we believe and how we choose to live in this fallen world. And faith, as we have seen, has the unstoppable power to drive out fear and hate, and fill with hope and love.

From this, we can take away an invaluable lesson: *Our feelings should follow our faith*. All these other factors we have looked at (like hormones, sleep, diet, etc.) can certainly affect our superficial emotion state, from anger to exuberance, but our deepest feelings as to who we perceive ourselves to be and where we belong and where are headed in this life, must flow from our faith. These deeply held beliefs must become the headwaters from which we allow our feelings to flow.

Where we get into trouble is when we allow our faith to follow our feelings. This is crippling, because *true faith never follows feelings*. Faith is a choice. Feelings are emotions. Emotions cannot create faith, only our choices can. Sometimes we make decisions on an emotional basis, but they rarely last. Eventually, these emotionally driven choices are either confirmed or reversed by a conscious act of our will after a time of sober reflection.

When we base our faith upon our feelings, our faith becomes a ship battered around by the winds and waves of emotions. This creates a destructive cycle where emotions trigger bad choices, which injure our faith, which in turn creates even more volatile emotional seas for us to attempt to navigate through, and even worse decisions, and a more deeply wounded faith, and so on.

But intentional decisions of faith based squarely upon God's Word will lead to healthy feelings and emotions. These choices calm our emotional waters, so instead of hanging on for dear life as we are tossed around by emotional white caps the size of three story buildings, we are able to cruise along through peaceful waters, and enjoy the ride. When we choose to trust God to keep His Word, our emotional seas are stilled, and healthy feelings follow in the wake of God's uplifting and unfailing promises.

Ephesians 4:13-24 "... reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves,

and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work... you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed. That, however, is not the way of life you learned... put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” (NASB)

Psalm 46:1-3 “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains quake at its swelling pride.” (NASB)

Matthew 7:24-27 “Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine (*Jesus*’) and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell – and great was its fall.” (NASB)

For example, the Joy and Peace we are looking at in this study certainly have emotional elements to them. Joy brings with it feelings of passion and exuberance. Peace brings with it feelings of contentment and satisfaction. We’ve even seen how a sense of Peace is one way God confirms we are on the right path, while the lack of Peace warns us when we have wandered from it. But the feelings of Joy and Peace flow *out* of our faith, hope, and love. They do not *create* faith, hope, and love.

In a healthy person (who is not suffering from an emotional disorder) healthy feelings will follow genuine faith. Feelings take their rightful place in the order of our lives, not in front of faith, where they *determine* our faith, but rather after our faith, where they *confirm* our faith. This is where our choices and resulting feelings fall into harmony and produce Joy and Peace.

This can only happen if we have strong minds and tender hearts. If our minds are strong, we will make good decisions. These good decisions will create Joy and Peace, which our tender hearts will be able to experience and enjoy. Weak minds and hard hearts will never know Joy and Peace. Instead, they will be perpetually tormented by the fear and hatred that inevitably come when we defy the grace offered to us by a holy, loving God.

As it relates to guilt, tender hearts will pick up on guilty feelings when we do something wrong. Strong minds will truly repent and seek forgiveness from both God and others. Then if guilt ever tries to worm its way back into our lives, strong minds will throw off these guilty feelings and choose instead to praise our gracious Heavenly Father with grateful, tender hearts.

Psalm 130:1-7 “Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD; Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you. I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope... put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption.” (NIV)

Psalm 79:9-13 “Help us, God our Savior, for the glory of your name; deliver us and forgive our sins or your name’s sake... Then we your people, the sheep of your pasture, will praise you forever; from generation to generation we will proclaim your praise.” (NIV)

So when your feelings seem to drag you down, get out your Bible, read through the verses that comfort you with God’s love, mercy, and kindness, and start to praise Him for His goodness and grace. Follow up with good choices in the different areas that may apply to your situation. Seek forgiveness if you have wronged someone. Forgive those who have wronged you. Take your stand, and speak the truth in love. Do those things that you know you are called to do by your Heavenly Father, even if you don’t feel like it.

As you do, your feelings will conform to your faith. They will take their rightful place, behind your faith, instead of in front of it. You will experience a healthy way of life where your faith positively influences your feelings, rather than a slow death where your feelings negatively influence your faith. And you will come to know the Joy and Peace God intends for you, as you accomplish His plan and purpose in a fallen world.

Proverbs 4:23 “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.” (NASB)

Ephesians 4:1-32 “... walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love... Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

Colossians 3:5-16 “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed... You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie... clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness,

humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts... And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly... And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Philippians 4:4-20 “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!... Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me (*Paul*), practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you... for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me... And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen.” (NASB)

Trauma.

Perhaps the most devastating snare and foothold is: Trauma. As used in this study, “trauma” does not refer to the effects of the petty annoyances we all endure in this life, like the jerk who cuts you off in traffic. Nor does it refer to the effects of the legitimately hurtful but common experiences that afflict us all from time to time, like a breakup with a girlfriend or boyfriend, or dealing with an unfair boss. Trauma results from the truly devastating things that strike all too often in a fallen world – murder, rape, violence, severe injury, the death of a loved one or child.

Trauma shatters the soul. It breaks your heart and mind into a million little pieces, and leaves you spiritually, emotionally, and physically devastated. It causes you to question just about everything, especially the existence and love of God, for you can’t help but ask, “How could a loving God allow this to happen to me?” It injects fear and anger into the deepest part of your being, where these two extremely destructive qualities bury deep roots and start to invade every facet of your personality. Then trauma leaves you feeling totally isolated and alone, to try and put the pieces of your broken life back together in the absence of God and under the constant oppression of fear and anger.

Those who have experienced trauma often spend the rest of their lives dealing with its effects. We fear those who caused our pain and struggle with deeply entrenched

(and sometimes repressed) anger towards them. The strength and intensity of our fears and anger are too powerful to be contained, and so these attitudes unintentionally spill over into all of our key relationships with spouses, family, and friends. Fear and anger pollute the headwaters of our hearts and minds, so that everything downstream is affected, whether or not it had anything to do with the original trauma. Every thought, word, and deed becomes tainted by fear and anger. As a result, our perception of and reaction to everything we encounter in life is distorted by the fractured lens of trauma.

We also are genuinely afraid of God and extraordinarily angry with Him for allowing the pain to come into our lives in the first place. Often we deny the existence of God, but as we have seen, in our heart-of-hearts we know He is, and we even know He cares for us. But we are then confronted with the devastating fact that God allowed something unspeakable to happen to us or someone we love, and the conflict between what we know deep down inside and the horror we have experienced rips our very soul in two. Instead of saving us, the all-powerful and all-loving God chose to stand aside and allow evil to violate us, and this realization is the greatest injury of all. It's the deepest, most severe wound a human being can suffer.

Psalm 22:1,2 “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest.” (NIV)

So how can this wound be healed? How can the shattered heart and soul be mended and made whole and strong again? How can the fear and anger, grafted so deeply within us, be purged and swept away? How can we learn to trust and love – both God and our fellow mankind – after the devastation of trauma?

Volumes have been written on this subject, and thankfully there are gifted experts who specialize in this area. If you or someone you love has been affected by trauma, you should seek out the excellent resources that are available to you, as you will need more help than just the few pages offered in this work.

With that important acknowledgment being said, the bottom line for purposes of this study is: *The only way to recover from trauma is through faith and forgiveness.* Somehow you have to find the strength within you to choose to trust God despite the hurt He allowed you to suffer, and you must choose to forgive the instrument that caused the suffering. And these are perhaps the most difficult choices anyone can ever be called upon to make in this life.

If you will choose to trust God, despite the enormity of your pain, (as we have seen) your faith will create hope, and your hope will inspire love, and together, faith, hope, and love will drive out fear and hate, and the anger born from hatred. Faith, hope, and love will sift through every fiber of your being, and take hold of the fear and

anger buried within you, and rip it out by the roots. They will wash you clean of the stain left by trauma, and set you free of its chains.

Faith, hope, and love will then empower you to forgive (in the manner described by God's Word – see the earlier discussion of Forgiveness and Accountability), and as you do, the pieces of your life, which were shattered by trauma, will begin to mend. And by God's grace they will come together in a way that rebuilds your heart and mind in the most powerful way imaginable – in the image of Christ, the embodiment of faith and forgiveness.

2 Corinthians 4:1-16 “... we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God... For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body... Therefore we do not lose heart...” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 3:3,18 “... you are a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts... And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord...” (NIV)

That is, very briefly, the spiritual “theory” behind how we are to respond to trauma. And the theory is nice, but in practice, *there is nothing more difficult than this in all of human existence*. If you have been crushed by the truly traumatic experiences that plague mankind, to afterwards make the choice to trust God and forgive others requires a supreme act of humility. It takes an absolute humbling of yourself and an acceptance of God's right as the sovereign Creator of the universe to allow unspeakable suffering to devastate you, without understanding the reason why, but still choosing to trust that God has a purpose in all things, and that His purpose is good, even if you can't possibly fathom what it is.

So where does someone find the will to do that?

“Will” is the key word here. Ultimately, whether we are able to put our faith in God and forgive others after experiencing trauma is a choice. We have to choose to do these things, despite the indescribable hurt. And that requires humility of the highest order. It takes an absolute denial of our human instincts to lash out, accuse, and seek vengeance; and it takes a willingness to accept from our Creator something that in the world’s eyes is impossible to endure.

Job 13:15 “Though He slay me, I will hope in Him...” (NASB)

Where can this kind of humility come from? Where can we find the resolve to bow down before the God who allowed us to be traumatized and say “I trust you” and mean it?

On our own, we can’t. None of us has the power within us to do that alone. It is not humanly possible. But with God, all things are possible. *And so it begins with a prayer to God for help.* Help to rise above the pain. Help to let go of the anger. Help to break free from the fear. Help to call out to the God who allowed our lives to be devastated.

Philippians 4:13 “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” (NASB)

Ephesians 3:20,21 “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.” (NIV)

Jeremiah 33:3 “Call to Me, and I will answer you...” (NASB)

Jeremiah 29:13 “You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.” (NASB)

If we will make this foundational decision, to cry out to God and honestly seek His help to trust Him and forgive others after the horrors of trauma, God will immediately go to work on our behalf. He will soften our hearts and strengthen our minds, so His Spirit can guide us through His Word. His Word will build us up, and His Spirit will enable us to do what is impossible on our own.

From His Word, we will receive those foundational truths without which we will never find comfort in a fallen world: God is. God cares. He has a plan and purpose that are worthy and good, even when His motivations are not revealed. God will not test us more than we are able to endure, but promises to provide the grace we need to know Joy and Peace despite the hurt. And God will overwhelmingly reward our faithfulness.

Exodus 3:13,14 “Moses said to God, ‘Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’” Then what shall I tell them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am.

This is what you are to say to the Israelites: “I AM has sent me to you.” ’ ”
(NIV)

Jeremiah 31:3 “... I (*God*) have loved you with an everlasting love...” (NIV)

Jeremiah 29:11-13 “ ‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future... You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.’ ” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 10:13 “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.” (NASB)

2 Chronicles 16:9 “For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His...” (NASB)

Isaiah 50:10 “... Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on their God.” (NIV)

Hebrews 11:6 “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (NIV)

Psalms 126:5,6 “Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 2:9 “but just as it is written, ‘THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.’ ” (NASB)

And from God’s Spirit, we will receive comfort and healing. God’s Spirit will use the Word as a balm to heal our wounds. Then He will give us the strength to carry on with our lives, not as mere survivors hanging on to our sanity by tortured fingernails, but as men, women, boys, and girls who have *overcome* the onslaught of the greatest pain a human being can experience, and come to know Joy “inexpressible” and Peace “surpassing comprehension.”

Psalms 147:1-3 “Praise the LORD!... He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.” (NASB)

Psalms 30:1-12 “I will exalt you, LORD, for you lifted me out of the depths... I called to you for help, and you healed me... To you, LORD, I called; to the Lord I cried for mercy... You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. LORD my God, I will praise you forever.” (NIV)

Isaiah 57:15-18 “For this is what the high and exalted One says – he who lives forever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite... I will heal them; I will guide them and restore comfort...’ ” (NIV)

Habakkuk 3:17-19 “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the

LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength..." (NIV)

2 Corinthians 8:1-4 "And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people." (NIV)

2 Corinthians 1:3-24 "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles... For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows... We (*Paul and his friends*) were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God... On him we have set our hope... Now it is God who makes... you stand firm in Christ. He... set His seal of ownership on us, and put His Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come... because it is by faith you stand firm." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

1 Peter 4:19 "Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right." (NASB – 1975 ed.)

Romans 15:13 "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (NIV)

If you have experienced trauma, *your journey to healing begins with a conversation with yourself*. You have to decide: Will you ask God to help you overcome trauma? Will you turn to the One who allowed your pain and say, "I don't understand how you could allow this. Human language cannot adequately express how hurt and angry I am, both at you and at others. But I also realize that I need you. I can't get through this without you. And I want you to help me learn to trust and love you again, and forgive those who hurt me, so I can be healed."

Words such as these are perhaps the most difficult of any for us to speak, but they are also the only ones that can give spark to the healing process after the devastation of trauma. They open the doors of the heart and mind and allow the light of God's power and grace to stream in. They break through the barriers of fear and hate with the battering ram of simple humility before God. *And then God's Word and Spirit begin the process whereby we are empowered to trust Him again*, and our faith creates hope, and our hope inspires love, and together faith, hope, and love utterly transform us into the likeness of Christ, who suffered and overcame the most devastating trauma of all, when God the Father turned His face from the Son, and allowed the penalty for the sins of the entire world to be poured out upon Him.

Your only other alternative is to walk the path of trauma alone, and seek comfort from the things of the world. Eventually, they will all fail you. You might find

temporary distraction, but you will never find true relief. Relief from suffering can only be found in our Creator. It is His monopoly. There is nowhere else to turn.

John 6:66-69 “... many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. ‘You do not want to leave too, do you?’ Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.’” (NIV)

John 16:33 “These things I (*Jesus*) have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.” (NASB)

Our most basic instinct after trauma is to turn away from God. We deny Him. We attempt to punish Him by abusing ourselves. We construct a wicked, self-serving distortion of God to facilitate our rebellion. But these things only intensify our suffering and heighten our loss.

Deep inside, as we have seen, at some point in our lives we all have grievances with God. We become angry with Him for something, and for those who experience trauma, this anger runs to the very core of their being. But at this core, this heart-of-hearts, there is also a knowledge that, despite our anger, God loves us with an infinite, absolute love. And our choice becomes: What will we hold on to, our anger or God’s love? We can’t hold on to both. We must hold on to one, and let go of the other.

We can never let go of our anger and fear without God’s help. This is especially true after trauma. The faith required is something that only God can impart to us. And so, that initial prayer to God for help, to give us the strength to turn to Him after trauma is absolutely vital. We will never recover from trauma without it.

For someone who has experienced trauma, that prayer may seem impossible. The feelings of hurt, anger, and resentment are so powerful, *you think you could never pray that prayer, but the truth is: You can.* You can choose to seek God’s help, while at the same time experiencing those feelings. In fact, it is perfectly fine to express those feelings on no uncertain terms to God as you also ask Him for help. As we have seen earlier in this chapter, God wants you to speak truthfully with Him, so He can truthfully answer.

Even in the grips of the most powerful rage, if we will cry out to God for help, and mean it, He will answer. He will absorb our anger, and as we simultaneously seek His grace, pour out comfort and healing.

We can’t always control our feelings. God understands this, and He doesn’t hold it against us. But we can control what we ask for, and we are definitely held

accountable for these choices. And so, we don't necessarily have to feel all warm and fuzzy about God when we cry out to Him, but we do need to genuinely acknowledge we need Him and desire His help. In a sense, *we don't have to feel it, but we do have to mean it.*

We must learn to run *to* God in our anger, not *away* from Him. We have to choose to seek Him, regardless of how we feel, then let God work. We bring our anger *to* God, lay it down at His feet, and seek His grace; rather than throwing our anger *at* Him, turning around, and running away into the darkness of the world, where ultimately the only thing we receive is the boomerang of our anger returning to torment us.

1 Peter 5:6,7 “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.” (NIV)

And as we turn our anger over to God, our feelings will begin to soften and eventually follow the lead of our faith. God's Spirit and Word will comfort and soothe our pain and sadness. Faith, hope, and love will conquer fear, hate, and anger. And as a part of this process of healing, God will address the question that haunts us most – the question of: Why?

Wounds, Scars, & Testimonies.

As we work through trauma and the lesser heartaches in our lives, it's natural and inevitable we ask the question: Why? Why did the holy, loving God stand aside and allow something terrible to happen, when it was entirely within His power to stop it?

We've looked at this question several times in this study. We've seen how the existence of freewill means there will be acts of evil committed in the world, and the only way God could prevent them is to remove our freedom of choice, which He will not do, because doing so would rob human history of any meaning. And we've seen how the entrance of sin into the world also brought with it disease and death, which sometimes visit the most undeserving.

Why the undeserving? Why couldn't these terrible things happen only to the murders, rapists, and tyrants that afflict the world? Why does God allow these things to torment the good people and innocent children as well?

We explored answers to these questions before. An arrangement whereby only bad people suffer in a world populated by people with freewill simply isn't possible. For freewill to be truly free its consequences must generally be unrestricted, and that means good people will inevitably suffer at the hands of bad people. And a rigid formula where disease and death only affects the sinful begs the question: Aren't we all sinful? How sinful would we have to be before God lets us get sick? Wouldn't we

question God's judgment in these matters, just as we question Him now? And wouldn't this arrangement rob us of the opportunity to demonstrate our faith, serve God, and bring light to the world?

Suffering is inevitable for a creation granted freewill. And so instead of trying to remove suffering, God does something remarkable with it (when we let Him): *God uses the wounds we suffer to give us a testimony.* And this testimony becomes the key to serving Him and thereby fulfilling our individual destinies.

Psalm 116:1-16 “I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live. The cords of death entangled me... I was overcome by distress and sorrow. Then I called on the name of the LORD... The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion... For you, LORD, have delivered me from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living. I trusted in the LORD... Truly I am your servant, LORD... you have freed me from my chains.” (NIV)

Psalm 13:6 “I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me.” (NIV)

Of course we would all like our testimony to be: I gave my life to Jesus and after that everything was perfect. But that testimony is not possible in a fallen world. Nobody's life is perfect. The existence of freewill within a fallen world will not allow a perfect life. Somebody or something will eventually come along to mess it up!

John 16:33 ‘I (*Jesus*) have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.’ (NIV)

Moreover, that perfect life we all conjure up for ourselves is a fantasy. That person we envy who seems to have it all doesn't. If we saw beneath the surface we would see that they hurt as much as we do. Those blessed only with the wealth to live a life of ease ultimately get bored, uninspired, and desperately lonely. Everyone is missing something in this life, and everyone gets wounded.

So, if we let Him, God does something amazing. He heals our wounds. He comforts our sorrows. He grants us Joy and Peace despite the suffering in this world. And that imparts to us an invaluable gift: A testimony.

Isaiah 57:15-18 “For this is what the high and exalted One says – he who lives forever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite... I will heal them; I will guide them and restore comfort...’” (NIV)

Psalm 147:1-7 “Praise the LORD. How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him... He heals the brokenhearted and binds up

their wounds... Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit. The LORD sustains the humble... Sing to the LORD with grateful praise; make music to our God..." (NIV)

Psalm 18:1-49 "I love you, LORD, my strength. The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I called to the LORD, who is worthy of praise, and I have been saved from my enemies... In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help... in the day of my disaster, but the LORD was my support... he rescued me... Therefore I will praise you, LORD, among the nations; I will sing the praises of your name." (NIV)

When we allow God to comfort and heal our broken hearts, we gain a testimony of how the living God walked with us through (not around) the darkness of the fallen world. We have a real life story of how God comforted and sustained us that we can share with others who are hurting for their comfort. *And it is through these testimonies we are able to serve God.*

It's hard to serve God without a testimony. If all we had to say was we had a really easy life with nothing much to challenge us, then that testimony is not very meaningful to the 99.99999% of the other people in the world who have had to face some genuinely painful stuff. And of course in reality no one has such a Pollyanna testimony in this world. Anyone who has lived very long has experienced something that wounded him or her deeply.

And this is where the testimony of someone who has experienced similar wounds is so effective in bringing comfort to a hurting soul. If someone can look you in the eye and with passion and authenticity say "I've been there; I've experienced that same hurt; and God brought me through it; let me tell you how" – you will listen. In fact, you will listen with openness and compassion, because there is a camaraderie between people who have suffered the same wounds, or wounds of similar magnitude.

A testimony of "well, that's pretty awful, and I've never experienced anything like that, but I know God will pull you through it somehow, brother," no matter how well meaning, does not have the same impact. It can't, because it remains in the realm of spiritual theory, rather than spiritual reality. For the really deep wounds, we need the friendship of someone with similar scars.

In some ways, our souls are like our bodies. Our souls can be wounded nearly to the death, but be healed, just as our bodies can. And as with our bodies, these wounds leave a mark – a scar, if you will – that stays with us long after the wound is healed.

Each scar on our body tells a story. Each scar on our soul tells one, too. Some scars are little. Some may cover large portions of our being. But each scar is evidence we have been *healed*. We are still alive. God still has good works for us to do. And

many times those good works are only made possible because of the scars we bear, and the stories of healing they represent.

Often we look at our scars in exactly the wrong way. We see them as something to be ashamed of, as visible reminders that we are damaged. But the truth is just the opposite. They are reminders we have been through the torments of this fallen world but healed by a loving Savior who has overcome the world. *So look at your scars, not as evidence you were hurt, but as evidence you were healed*, and use them to tell your unique story of the grace God has granted to you.

Psalm 107:1-43 “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.

Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story... they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress... Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love... for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things... He brought them out of darkness, the utter darkness, and broke away their chains... he breaks down gates of bronze and cuts through bars of iron... He sent out his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave... He turned rivers into a desert, flowing springs into thirsty ground... He turned the desert into pools of water and the parched ground into flowing springs... Let the one who is wise heed these things and ponder the loving deeds of the LORD.” (NIV)

Psalm 30:1-12 “I will exalt you, LORD, for you lifted me out of the depths... I called to you for help, and you healed me... Sing the praises of the LORD, you his faithful people; praise his holy name. For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning... To you, LORD, I called; to the Lord I cried for mercy... You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. LORD my God, I will praise you forever.” (NIV)

God allows good people to suffer because He is preparing them for service. He is creating within them a living testimony of His grace, which they can then share with a hurting world. God comforts us in our suffering, so we can share this same comfort with others who don't know Him, but need Him, just like we do.

2 Corinthians 1:3-5 “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.” (NIV)

Psalm 13:5,6 “But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me.” (NIV)

And in this service, we fulfill God's plan and purpose and find the Joy and Peace for which we long. We pass comfort from one wounded soul to another, and within this holy exchange God imparts Joy “inexpressible” and Peace “surpassing comprehension.” We learn

that we did not suffer without purpose. God did indeed allow something devastating to happen to us, but He also brought us through it, and then used us as an instrument to bring healing to someone who has experienced the same pain. This is our destiny, the “why” we long to discover. And the depth of the Joy and the Peace this discovery brings reaches infinitely deeper than any happiness we could have ever experienced if we had not suffered in the first place.

1 Peter 4:12-19 “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed... Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

1 Peter 1:1-17 “... To God’s elect, strangers in the world... Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power... In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy... Since you call on a Father who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

God’s optics – Saving the difficult tasks for the most loved.

A theme that plays over and over again throughout the scriptures is: God’s ways are not our ways. His sense of perspective and proportion is very different than our own. So are His weights and measures. The holy, loving Creator of the universe and everything in it views our lives with a very different measuring stick than the one the world tries to force into our hands from birth. And it’s important for us to understand the difference if we ever hope to know Joy and Peace in a fallen world.

Isaiah 55:8,9 “ ‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the LORD. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’ ” (NIV)

The world measures worth and success by size, and bigger is better. Whether it’s bank accounts, houses, power, or prestige, everyone is taught to accumulate as much as possible, and whoever gets the most wins. This is how the world wants us to measure the success and significance of our lives.

But God places *no* value on *any* of these things. If you've got them, it's because either He gave them to you or He allowed the world to give them to you, so He's not in the least bit impressed with what you possess.

God is impressed by faith. Sometimes (as in the verse below), He's even amazed! Because if you have faith, that means you have come to know and trust Him, and that in turn only comes from the most precious thing of all to God: A humble heart.

Luke 7:1-10 "When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people who were listening, he entered Capernaum. There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, 'This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue.' So Jesus went with them. He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: 'Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, "Go," and he goes; and that one, "Come," and he comes. I say to my servant, "Do this," and he does it.' When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, 'I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.' Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well." (NIV)

Galatians 5:6 "... The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." (NIV)

1 Samuel 16:7 "... for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." (NASB)

As we have seen, humility before God sets us on a course where our hearts become full of faith, our minds become full of hope, and we express these things through love. We are transformed into selfless, discerning, servants of God.

This is much more than servanthood as the world characterizes it. The world's spin on being a servant is that it is something degrading and scornful; something to be avoided at all costs. It's below us, and life is a struggle to claw our way out of the heap by any means necessary to become the master.

God sees it exactly the opposite. Being the servant of the almighty God is the greatest compliment and highest calling anyone could ever have. He wants us purposefully turning our backs on what is elevated by the world and willingly taking on the role of His servant, because this is the only place where we can be what He truly wants us to be: His friend.

James 2:23 “... ‘Abraham believed God...’ and he was called God’s friend.” (NIV)

Philippians 3:7-9 “But whatever things were gain to me (*Paul*), those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him...” (NASB)

Matthew 6:19-21 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (NIV)

1 Timothy 6:7-19 “For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it... Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs... pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith... Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.” (NIV)

1 John 2:15-17 “Do not love the world or anything in the world... For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Luke 16:15 “He (*Jesus*) said to them (*the Pharisees*), ‘You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God’s sight.’ ” (NIV)

Matthew 20:20-27 “Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. ‘What is it you want?’ he asked. She said, ‘Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom... When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’ ” (NIV)

John 15:14-17 “You are my (*Jesus*) friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last – and so that

whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other.” (NIV)

When we humble ourselves before God, and truthfully and joyfully tell Him that we are His servants, and then demonstrate this to Him through our thoughts, words, and deeds, that’s when we become one with Him. We walk hand in hand with Him and accomplish His plan and purpose. In the world’s eyes, we’ve debased ourselves. In God’s eyes, we’ve reached the stars.

1 John 2:5,6 “But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.” (NIV)

John 17:1-26 “After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: ‘Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you... I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I pray for them... Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one... I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world... My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me... Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.’” (NIV)

Luke 9:23-48 “Then he (*Jesus*) said to them all: ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?’... An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. Then he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest.’” (NIV)

Psalms 73:23-28 “Nevertheless I am continually with You; You have taken hold of my right hand. With Your counsel You will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing

on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever... as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all Your works” (NASB)

Isaiah 42:5,6 “This is what God the LORD says – the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: ‘I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you... a light...’ ” (NIV)

Philippians 2:14,15 “Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, ‘children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.’ Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky” (NIV)

We let go of the things of the world, take up our cross and follow Jesus, and become God’s friends and trusted servants. God can then use us in His plan to do amazing things. God can send us anywhere to do anything, and we will succeed, because we have the good will and support of a Master who is the Creator of the universe and everything in it.

Yet sometimes these errands that God sends His servants to complete are very difficult, and the only way they can be accomplished is through the suffering of the messengers. Who would God choose to take on these tough errands? Would He pick someone who doesn’t know Him well and He cannot trust, or His most beloved and trusted servants?

We all know the answer. For truly difficult tasks, we pick our best and finest, and God does the same thing. He picks the cream of the crop to deliver the difficult messages, and many times the only way these missions can be accomplished entails tremendous heartache and pain for the messengers.

For example, Paul was sent on his groundbreaking missionary journeys, and instead of being greeted with warmth and gratitude, he was repeatedly beaten, flogged, stoned, imprisoned, and ultimately beheaded for his troubles. Many early Christians met similar fates as they turned their backs on the world and openly embraced a risen Savior. Modern missionaries and Christians throughout the non-believing world are similarly persecuted for their faith. We also see faithful believers who suffer unspeakable tragedies in their lives – a fatal accident, a terminal illness, a rape, a murder, the loss of a child or loved one.

From the world’s eyes, it seems that God has utterly forsaken these people. He must not care about them at all, or be angry with them, if He even exists at all. But in God’s eyes, these precious servants are dramatically fulfilling their uniquely high callings. They are trusting God in the most difficult of circumstances, and through their faith they shine a light for others with similar hurts to follow in the darkness. They illuminate the fallen world, and provide shining beacons of hope for the lost.

2 Corinthians 4:2-10 “... we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ... For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 3:3,18 “... you are a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts... And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord...” (NIV)

The somewhat counterintuitive truth is: *God reserves the most difficult tasks for those He loves most.* He doesn’t send strangers or the incompetent to take on the dangerous and heartbreaking tasks. He sends those who are closest to Him and whom He can trust to not falter.

This is exactly the opposite of how the world works. We make it easy on those we love, and we make it difficult on those we hate. But God is not trying to make it difficult for anyone, because God does not hate anyone. He loves us all, including the lost. Yet we are all adrift in a fallen world where we inflict so much pain and hurt upon one another. In order to bring light into this darkness, someone must enter and illuminate it through faith – and not faith amidst blue skies and calm seas, but amidst the most horrifying storms imaginable.

And so God looks amongst His children and picks those who love Him most to suffer the most. This begins with Jesus Himself, who loved God far more than anyone who has ever lived, and likewise suffered more as He paid for our sins on the cross. It also includes those faithful missionaries, pastors, and regular men and women and boys and girls, who have suffered and died for their faith. It includes that faithful person who gets sick or injured and dies, and their loving, grieving families who are left behind. Also those born with birth defects, disabled by injury, abused sexually, orphaned, or abandoned. We could go on and on.

Does God not love these faithful believers? Has He abandoned them? Is He downright malicious towards them? Of course not! He loves and cherishes them more than our finite minds can even begin to comprehend! And in His infinite knowledge and love He knows that deep within them they have a love for Him that is strong enough to endure unspeakable suffering. And so He *honors* them with the *privilege* of suffering for His name, and by their faith they glorify Him exceedingly and bring unquenchable light to the darkness.

Acts 5:40-42 “... They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.” (NASB)

Matthew 5:11,12 “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me (*Jesus*). Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (NASB)

Enduring this kind of pain and heartbreak may not seem like an honor or privilege, but that is exactly how God wants us to learn to view it. He wants us to shift our optics, so we see undeserved suffering the way God sees it: As an honor He bestows upon those who love Him most.

Why is this an honor? First, because it is a confirmation God trusts you. It is a sign God has confidence you will glorify Him through intense suffering. He wouldn't allow you to endure it, unless He knew that by His grace you have it within you to overcome it. And so the greater the suffering, the greater God's affirmation of His confidence in you.

Second, it's an honor because God rewards our faith. While God allows His faithful servants to suffer in order to glorify Him, the suffering does not last forever. Ultimately, either in this life or in the next, God takes the suffering away and bestows rewards *disproportionally greater* than our suffering. For every ounce of temporary heartache we endure with faith, hope, and love, God rewards with tons of blessings that last throughout eternity.

Hebrews 11:6 “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (NIV)

Romans 8:18 “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (NASB)

Matthew 19:28-30 “Jesus said to them, ‘I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne... everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for

my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.' ” (NIV)

Hebrews 6:10-12 “God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him... We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.” (NIV)

Isaiah 49:23 “... those who hope in me (*God*) will not be disappointed.” (NIV)

Psalm 126:5,6 “Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.” (NIV)

Psalm 30:4,5 “Sing praise to the LORD, you His godly ones, and give thanks to His holy name... Weeping may last for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning.” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 2:9 “but just as it is written, ‘THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.’ ” (NASB)

This concept can be very difficult to understand and accept, because it is so radically different than how we humans behave. We look at someone with a relatively easy life, and we think they are blessed by God. And we look at someone with a truly difficult life and we think God has turned His back on them. But it is much more likely the opposite is true.

It may be that those living lives of ease are doing so because God knows they would crumble with the slightest bit of adversity. God loves us all and He wants the best for all of us. He doesn't want anyone to fall apart. So sometimes a life of ease may be granted to the weak to give them time to seek the One who has so greatly blessed them without the potential distraction of adversity. And if they never seek God, then God can abandon them to their lives of ease, and when they die and stand before Him they will have no excuse for the choices they made.

On the other end of the spectrum, God can use the adversity and heartache of this fallen world to take a strong person and make him or her even stronger. God uses the faith they demonstrate in the most challenging of circumstances to create brilliant light in the darkness, to illuminate the path to Him for the lost to follow. What greater service to God is there? What greater reason could there be for God to reward the faithful?

There is nothing particularly spectacular about someone with an easy life glorifying God. That is only natural and right. What is truly spectacular is when someone with a difficult life glorifies God despite the hurt. That is the result of a choice that goes against our natural inclinations and instead is motivated by a true understanding and trust of God. We know Him and we love Him. And nothing in this fallen world can come between us.

Psalm 73:25-28 “... besides You, I desire nothing on earth... God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever... as for me, the nearness of God is my good...” (NASB)

In a sense, we can measure the greatness of our lives by the greatness of the challenges we are called to face. If God has given you great challenges, then take heart. It’s a sign of His confidence in you. He would only subject you to these challenges if He knew you had it within you to overcome, and He would never allow them without also providing the grace you need to accomplish His purpose. If your challenges are great, your potential to play an important, meaningful part in God’s plan is equally great.

1 Peter 4:12-19 “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed... Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

Isaiah 41:10-14 “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand... For I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, do not fear; I will help you. Do not be afraid...” (NIV)

Joshua 1:9 “... Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.” (NIV)

Psalm 23:1-4 “The LORD is my shepherd... Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me.” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 10:13 “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.” (NASB)

2 Chronicles 16:9 “For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His...” (NASB)

Psalm 62:1-12 “My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken... Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken. My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge... One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong, and that you, O Lord, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Psalm 46:1-3 “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains quake at its swelling pride.” (NASB)

If your life is relatively easy, prepare yourself for the inevitable moment when trials and heartache come, because if you are following Jesus, they will come. Jesus warned us of this. But *don't receive these challenges as a sign God has abandoned you*. Receive them as a sign God has called you to His service, because He knows you are ready, and He wants to use your faith in His plan to bring the light of grace to a dark, fallen world.

John 15:18-21 “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me (*Jesus*) first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you... If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me.” (NIV)

Matthew 5:5-45 “Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth... Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you... whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also... love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven...” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 4:17,18 “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (NASB)

The life God gave you.

Now let's step back and consider something. If we truly believe a holy, loving God has a specific, vital, preordained, and good plan for our lives (see Chapter 6), and if we follow these truths to their logical conclusion, then we can derive from them something important and perhaps unexpected about our circumstances: *The life God gives you is the absolute best He could give you, given how you have chosen to exercise your freewill.*

What exactly does this mean? It means that in eternity past, before the creation of the universe or anything in it, when God chose to create you, He considered how you would exercise your freewill (that is; the choices you would make) under every conceivable circumstance throughout all of history, and placed you in exactly the best time and the best place He possibly could for you to contribute to His plan. God considered all the different places, and all the different times, and all the different families He could have brought you into, and picked the absolute best combination for you, so you would have the greatest opportunity to serve Him, given how you would exercise your freewill.

Isaiah 46:9-11 “... I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying,

'My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure'... I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it."
(NASB)

Isaiah 14:24-27 "The LORD Almighty has sworn, 'Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will happen... This is the plan determined for the whole world; this is the hand stretched out over all nations. For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?'" (NIV)

Acts 17:26 "From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands." (NIV)

Psalm 139:1,16 "... LORD... you know me... all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." (NIV)

Ephesians 1:3-8 "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ... For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his site. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace... In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace" (NIV)

Psalm 25:4-9 "Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long. Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you, LORD, are good. Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way." (NIV)

Isaiah 25:1 "LORD, you are my God; I will exalt you and praise your name, for in perfect faithfulness you have done wonderful things, things planned long ago." (NIV)

Ephesians 2:10 "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Jeremiah 29:11-13 " 'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future... You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.' " (NIV)

This may be difficult to receive, but take a moment and think carefully about these things. Is it conceivable that God would be up in heaven thinking, "Gee, I wish I had brought Jane Doe into the world 500 years earlier (or later), in a different country, and to a different family. Then she would have been able to accomplish so much more with her life. I guess I really messed that one up." Of course not! God is absolute and infinite holiness and love. He doesn't mess things up, and He can do nothing but the absolute best for us, with the only thing limiting His options being the choices we freely choose to make.

This should be tremendously encouraging! So many times we look at our lives and think, "If only..." We wish we had been born at a different time or place or in some

different circumstance and think then our lives would be so much better. But the truth is, they wouldn't. If they would have been, God would have done it. But He didn't, and that means you were actually born into the absolute best life you possibly could have known given the choices you would make.

This is totally the opposite of our natural human thinking. We see multitudes of different circumstances we could have been born into that we know would be exponentially better for us, where we could have been so much happier. But God didn't. If He had foreseen a better scenario, He would have brought it about. His perfect holiness and love would have demanded it.

Why is God's view and our view of the best life for us so different? God chooses the life for us that provides the greatest opportunity to serve Him, because He knows that this life will bring us the greatest Joy and Peace and the greatest rewards, in this life and especially in eternity. Our choice most often would be the life that provides the greatest ease and opportunity to indulge in the material things of the world. The difference arises from how we define our "best" life. God defines it as the life that brings the greatest meaning, purpose, and opportunity for service. We define it as the life that brings the greatest material prosperity and ease.

And so we view the difficulties and heartaches of our lives as disappointments. We view them as lost opportunities to experience happy lives. But God sees them just the opposite. He sees them as divine opportunities to trust Him, to demonstrate our faith, and in so doing, to serve Him and bring glory to Him and light to the world, and to know His inexpressible Joy and all-surpassing Peace.

1 Peter 4:12-19 "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed... Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right." (NASB – 1975 ed.)

It's important to let these ideas sink in if we want to experience lives of Joy and Peace. From our limited human perspective, it is easy to think our lives would be so much better if we were born into different, easier circumstances, and this misconception weighs us down and misdirects our search for happiness. We try to find happiness by altering our circumstances to match the false image we conceive of a happy life. Our focus is on our circumstances within the fallen world, instead of on our relationship with a Creator that transcends the fallen world.

But from God's unlimited divine perspective, He has already placed you and me precisely where He wants us in time and space, so we can fulfill our destiny in His

plan. And the unique point where we land on the map of human history may involve great hardships, challenges, and (apparent) disappointments. But these difficulties in truth are not designed by God to be obstacles or barriers to our happiness. Instead, they are the vehicles through which God desires to impart to us Joy inexpressible and Peace surpassing comprehension, as we learn to trust and serve Him through our faith, hope, and love.

1 Peter 1:1-17 “... To God’s elect, strangers in the world... Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power... In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy... Since you call on a Father who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Philippians 4:4-7 “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (NASB)

These can be very difficult concepts to accept, especially if you were born into truly difficult circumstances. It’s diametrically opposed to everything the world shouts at us. But as we have seen, God is diametrically opposed to the fallen world. Everything about His wisdom and ways is the exact opposite of the wisdom and ways of the world. The world tells us: “Change your circumstances (by any means necessary) and you will be happy.” God tells us: “Change your heart through faith in My Son, and you will know true happiness regardless of your circumstances, and I will use you in My service and give you lives full of power, purpose, and meaning.”

As we come to accept these truths, suddenly life seems less unfair. We are not jealous of those with easy or desirable circumstances, because we know circumstances are not the key to happiness. In fact, if we truly get to know the rich, famous, and powerful, we often learn firsthand how these things can easily become insurmountable obstacles to happiness, because they are such deceptive and powerful distractions to a humble, obedient relationship with our Heavenly Father. Much, much too often, those who conquer the world have forfeited their souls to do so, and where is the profit in that?

Matthew 19:23,24 “Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’ ” (NIV)

1 Timothy 6:7-19 “For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it... Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs... pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith... Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.” (NIV)

Mark 8:36 “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?” (NASB)

As we come to see the challenges in our lives, not as indicators that God has abandoned us (as the world would like us to see them), but as the God-appointed vehicles through which we can learn to trust and serve our Lord, then we view all things in our lives ultimately as a blessing. We view even the greatest heartaches as part of God’s preordained, specific, vital, good, and *best* plan for our lives, designed to allow us to serve Him most, and thereby bless us most. And then, as the scripture declares, we can “give thanks to Him in all circumstances,” even the difficult circumstances, with sincerity and joy.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 “Rejoice always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” (NIV)

James 1:2-12 “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing... Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.” (NASB)

1 Peter 5:10 “After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you.” (NASB)

Ephesians 5:15-20 “Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is... be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (NIV)

Habakkuk 3:17-19 “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength...” (NIV)

The life God gave you is specifically designed by God so that you can come to know Him in the absolute best way that you as an individual can come to know your Creator. The trials and tribulations you face are specifically tailored by God so you can grow into His unique purpose. No other life would have been better, or God would have given it to you. Your life is what it is because that’s what you need to truly come to know Him, love Him, serve Him, and from this find Joy and Peace.

Job 10:8-12 “Your (*God’s*) hands shaped me and made me... Remember that you molded me like clay... Did you not... knit me together with bones and sinews? You gave me life...” (NIV)

Psalms 139:1-16 “You have searched me, LORD, and you know me... For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made... your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.” (NIV)

Romans 12:2 “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” (NASB)

Psalms 119:89-172 “Your word, LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens... How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path. Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path... The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple... May my cry come before you, LORD; give me understanding according to your word. May my supplication come before you; deliver me according to your promise... May my tongue sing of your word...” (NIV)

Psalms 25:4-9 “Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long. Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you, LORD, are good. Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.” (NIV)

Proverbs 3:5,6 “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” (NIV)

Those specific heartaches that are so especially painful to you, because of who you are and how God made you, are in truth your greatest opportunities to exercise your faith and glorify God. God purposefully allowed these things to appear in your life,

because (when you trust Him despite the hurt) they blend with who you are to create a one-of-a-kind testimony of faith. They are the kindling from which you are able to bring a unique light into the dark, fallen world – a light that only you could bring about because of the way God made you and the life God gave you.

Matthew 5:5-45 “Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth... Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you... You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven... whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also... love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven...” (NASB)

1 Peter 4:19 “Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

So be encouraged! View your life, whatever it is, with a growing confidence that it is God’s best and most advantageous plan for your life. View your disappointments and heartaches as great opportunities to trust God and fulfill your destiny. And realize that in God’s eyes, the smallest, most seemingly insignificant acts of faith have far more eternal significance than the seemingly greatest acts taking place on the world’s stage.

Matthew 10:42 “And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my (*Jesus*)’ disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.” (NIV)

This requires great humility and spiritual maturity. Many of us view our lives with a significant measure of disappointment, because it is not filled with the earthly glamour the world peddles as the ultimate prize. But as we learn to see our lives through the eyes of God, rather than the eyes of the world, what we value changes, and we come to appreciate the blessings and even the difficulties in our lives, as through our faithful service God is able to use us as His instruments to bring the message of grace to a lost and hurting world.

2 Corinthians 3:3,18 “... you are a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts... And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord...” (NIV)

Where ever and however you begin your journey, and whatever twists and turns you encounter along your way, whether they seem wonderful or devastating, receive these things as what God designed them to be: They are the medium from which you become able to weave your one-of-a-kind picture of faithfulness and trust into the fabric of human history, for the glory of God, the illumination of the world, with Joy inexpressible and Peace surpassing comprehension, and blessings in time and eternity that defy description.

Colossians 3:12-17 “... put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another... Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.” (NASB)

Isaiah 58:11-14 “The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail... not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance...” (NIV)

Isaiah 42:5,6 “This is what God the LORD says – the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: ‘I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you... a light...’ ” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 2:9 “but just as it is written, ‘THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.’ ” (NASB)

A central truth: What God allows, He redeems.

Throughout this study we have considered the realities of human suffering from several different perspectives. The subject poses vexing questions, for which there are often no easy answers. And the specific question of “why do good people sometimes suffer” is a particularly difficult riddle to solve, especially when that good person is you or someone you love.

Perhaps a good way to summarize all we have learned about this topic is to boil it down to a central truth we can hang on to when the inevitable strikes. It’s a matter of time before we or someone we care about suffers for no apparent worthy reason. And during these calamitous times we are not necessarily in a state of mind where we are capable of careful consideration of the many subtle, interweaving truths that

together can illuminate the darkness we face. We need something simple but powerful to light the way to comfort and hope.

What this central truth is may be different for different people. You should take some time and consider this for yourself. What foundational belief do you hold that is strong enough to sustain you when a tragedy strikes you do not understand? Figure it out now, so it's there by your side, within easy reach, available in an instant when the storms of life overtake you.

Because overtake you they will. If you live long enough in a fallen world, there will eventually come a day when some sort of suffering comes along and overwhelms you like a wave. It happens to all of us as a part of the tests we face while growing into the men and women God desires us to be.

And so we need a central truth we can hold on to as a lifeline in the storm. Later, once we have steadied ourselves, we can unpack the many related truths about our holy, loving God contained within this lifeline and gather from them ever increasing strength and resolve. But to start with, we need something central to keep us steady and centered, with our heads above the waters, so instead of drowning we are able to find our way to the shore. What could that be?

Psalm 34:19 “Many are the afflictions of the righteous...” (NASB)

2 Timothy 3:12 “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,” (NIV)

1 Peter 4:12-19 “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed... Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

John 16:33 “These things I (*Jesus*) have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.” (NASB)

Again, you should prayerfully consider your own answer to this question. Humbly ask God to reveal something central about Himself that would be especially meaningful to you, which you can always rely upon as a covering when the rain begins to fall. He will never fail to answer a prayer like that! If your child asked for something like this from you, would you refuse to answer? Of course not, and neither will God, who is an infinitely better parent than we will ever be!

Jeremiah 33:3 “Call to Me and I will answer you, and I will tell you great and mighty things, which you do not know.” (NASB)

James 1:5 “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.” (NASB)

Luke 11:9-13 “So I (*Jesus*) say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you... Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he?... how much more shall your heavenly Father give... to those who ask Him?” (NASB)

Jeremiah 29:13 “You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.” (NASB)

For purposes of this study, let’s consider one of many central truths about God that can serve as a lifeline when our lives are beset by waves of undeserved suffering: *What God allows, He redeems.*

As we have seen, God does not *cause* all things. Freewill is truly free, and the decisions of mankind both bless and wreak havoc upon the earth. But ultimately it is God who *allows* all things. He is all-powerful, so nothing transpires on earth He could not prevent. He also has a plan and purpose, which He will permit nothing to interfere with, so no incident in history occurs without His permission. If something happens, it happens because God allows it to happen.

Isaiah 14:24-27 “The LORD Almighty has sworn, ‘Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will happen...’ This is the plan determined for the whole world; this is the hand stretched out over all nations. For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?” (NIV)

2 Chronicles 20:6 “... O LORD, the God of our fathers, are You not God in the heavens? And are You not ruler over all the kingdoms of the nations? Power and might are in Your hand so that no one can stand against You.” (NASB)

Isaiah 43:13 “Even from eternity I (*God*) am He, and there is none who can deliver out of My hand; I act and who can reverse it?” (NASB)

Isaiah 46:9-11 “... I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure... I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it.’ ” (NASB)

This imposes an enormous responsibility on God. If He is the gatekeeper through whom all events must pass, there must be some acceptable reason for all things if God is to continue to be holy and loving. For His divine character to remain intact, all things must somehow serve a higher purpose.

God solves this dilemma through an unbreakable promise that He will work *all things* (including our suffering) together for good when we trust Him. In this way, what God allows, He redeems. It’s not all for nothing. When God allows suffering to occur, He only does so when He also knows He can bring about great good from it. God must permit suffering if He is also going to permit His creation to choose freely,

but because He is endlessly holy and the embodiment of pure love, He only allows suffering to occur when He can also use the suffering to bring about good.

Romans 8:28-39 “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose... What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God’s elect?... Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, ‘FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED.’ But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NASB)

Proverbs 16:4-20 “The LORD works out everything to its proper end – even the wicked for a day of disaster. The LORD detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished... blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD.” (NIV)

Genesis 50:20 “You (*Joseph’s brothers*) intended to harm me (*Joseph*), but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 10:13 “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.” (NASB)

For example, God sometimes allows His children to suffer because He knows that through it we can learn to trust Him and love others, and thereby grow and serve Him. Our bond with God and the light we bring into the world are strengthened, and so often this kind of relationship and service can only be fostered through the endurance of pain.

Proverbs 17:3 “The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tests hearts.” (NASB)

James 1:2-4 “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (NASB)

Deuteronomy 8:2-16 “Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years... He led you through the vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions... to humble and test you so that in the end it might go well with you.” (NIV)

Job 23:10 “... when he (*God*) has tested me, I will come forth as gold.” (NIV)

Hebrews 13:9 “... It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace...” (NIV)

But it's worth it! The relationship and service that develop through faith, hope, and love during times of suffering bring us inexpressible Joy and surpassing Peace, and blessing in this life and (especially) in eternity that could come no other way. The suffering – no matter how severe – is temporary, but the Joy, Peace, and blessing are greater still and eternal, redeemed because God allowed us to suffer.

2 Corinthians 4:17,18 “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (NASB)

Romans 8:18 “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (NASB)

Matthew 19:28-30 “Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne... everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.’ ” (NIV)

Matthew 10:42 “And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward.” (NASB)

1 Peter 1:6-8 “In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy,” (NIV)

Revelation 2:26-28 “And he who overcomes... I (*Jesus*) will give him the morning star.” (NASB)

As we have seen before, this type of spiritual theory looks very nice on paper but putting it into practice when we have experienced real-world injury can be unspeakably difficult. Sometimes, suffering seems beyond bearing. If you are the victim of a terrible crime, or suddenly lose someone you love, it can be hard to fathom any way God can bring good from something like that. But that amazing truth we must humbly receive is: God can! God can take the most unthinkable heartbreaks, and when we will chose to release them to Him, use them in utterly miraculous ways to bring extraordinary good to a fallen world.

Psalm 147:1-3 “Praise the LORD!... He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.” (NASB)

Psalm 30:1-12 “I will exalt you, LORD, for you lifted me out of the depths... I called to you for help, and you healed me... To you, LORD, I called; to the Lord I cried

for mercy... You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. LORD my God, I will praise you forever.” (NIV)

He longs to do so! He would never have let these things happen if He couldn't ultimately redeem them. When we let it sink in that God is truly infinite, absolute holiness and love, then we are assured He can act no other way.

Psalm 33:1-22 “Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him... For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does... let all the people of the world revere him... the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations... From heaven the LORD looks down and sees all mankind; from his dwelling place he watches all who live on earth – he who forms the hearts of all, who considers everything they do... the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine. We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. May your unfailing love be with us, LORD, even as we put our hope in you.” (NIV)

Isaiah 30:15-18 “... In repentance and rest you will be saved, in quietness and trust is your strength... Therefore the Lord longs to be gracious to you, and therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you. For the Lord is a God of justice; how blessed are all those who long for Him.” (NASB)

Test Him! Humble yourself enough to tell Him you are taking your most brutal, agonizing hurt and giving it to Him, and challenge Him to redeem it. Mean it, and see what happens. You have absolutely nothing to lose, and absolutely everything to gain.

Psalm 25:14 “The LORD confides in those who fear him...” (NIV)

Deuteronomy 4:29-31 “... if... you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul... For the LORD your God is a merciful God; He will not abandon or destroy you or forget...” (NIV)

Luke 13:34 “Jerusalem, Jerusalem... how often I (*Jesus*) have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.” (NIV)

Isaiah 58:2-11 “... seek Me day by day, and delight to know My ways... delight in the nearness of God... Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth; and your righteousness will go before you; the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer... And the LORD will continually guide you, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, and give strength to your bones; and you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.” (NASB)

Isaiah 49:23 “... those who hope in me (*God*) will not be disappointed.” (NIV)

Psalm 17:6 “I call on you, my God, for you will answer me...” (NIV)

Psalm 5:2-12 “Hear my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray... in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly... Lead me, LORD, in your righteousness... make your way straight before me... let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in you. Surely, LORD, you bless the righteous; you surround them with your favor as with a shield.” (NIV)

Micah 7:7,8 “But as for me, I will watch expectantly for the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me. Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy. Though I fall I will rise; though I dwell in darkness, the LORD is a light for me.” (NASB)

When tragedy strikes, and you are reeling from the blows, remember this central truth: What God allows, He redeems. Trust that as you keep your faith in Him, hold on to the hope you have in Him, and love those around you, God will bring good from your pain. As you do, God will surround you with His comfort and strength, and your story with Him will deepen and bloom. Your testimony will become exceedingly powerful. You will become a mighty instrument in the hand of the living God through which He brings beauty into a fallen world. And what God allowed will be redeemed.

Psalm 107:2-43 “Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story... they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way... Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind, for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things... they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness, the utter darkness, and broke away their chains. Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds... tell of his works with songs of joy... Let the one who is wise heed these things and ponder the loving deeds of the LORD.” (NIV)

Isaiah 57:15-18 “For this is what the high and exalted One says – he who lives forever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite... I will heal them; I will guide them and restore comfort...’ ” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 1:3-5 “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Isaiah 43:1-5 “But now, this is what the LORD says – he who created you... he who formed you... ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not

set you ablaze. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior... Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you... Do not be afraid, for I am with you..." (NIV)

Isaiah 48:17 "This is what the LORD says – your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: 'I am the LORD your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go.'" (NIV)

Lamentations 3:19-58 "I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, 'The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.' The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD... For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone. To crush underfoot all prisoners in the land, to deny people their rights before the Most High, to deprive them of justice – would not the Lord see such things? Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come? Why should the living complain when punished for their sins? Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD. Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven, and say: 'We have sinned and rebelled...' Those who were my enemies without cause hunted me like a bird. They tried to end my life in a pit and threw stones at me; the waters closed over my head, and I thought I was about to perish. I called on your name, LORD, from the depths of the pit. You heard my plea: 'Do not close your ears to my cry for relief.' You came near when I called you, and you said, 'Do not fear.' You, Lord, took up my case; you redeemed my life." (NIV)

Measuring expectations: High expectations of God and low expectations of others (a source of power and freedom, and an end to disappointment and disillusionment).

Another key to living our lives with Joy and Peace is to properly measure our expectations. Disappointment and disillusionment are two devastating forces that never fail to arrive and beat up on us when our expectations are not met. We get excited expecting something to happen and when it doesn't, we are crushed. Or we expect nothing bad to happen and when it does, we are equally hurt.

Usually this occurs because we trust in the wrong things. We foolishly place our confidence in the undeserving, and then we are shattered when we are inevitably let down. Where can we confidently entrust our hopes and dreams?

Of course the immediate (and correct) answer we jump to is: God. Only God is deserving of our trust, because only He is unwavering in His holiness and love. God is always good, and He is always loving. We, as sinful, fallen men and women, are

constantly wavering in our sense of right and wrong, and our ability and desire to love others is as consistent and dependable as the wind. We all know the only reliable place to lay down our trust is at the feet of God.

1 Corinthians 2:5 “... your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

Isaiah 49:23 “... those who hope in me (*God*) will not be disappointed.” (NIV)

But how often do we do that? Really do that. Not just pretend to do that.

So often, somewhere at the beginning, middle, or end of our panic, don't we say a quick, shallow prayer to God asking for His help, and then get right back to (what we consider to be) the real work of lobbying our family, friends, and neighbors to get us out of our mess? Most Christians know and pay lip service to the fact that only God deserves our confidence and trust and people are unreliable, but our actions indicate just the opposite. In truth, we consider God to be unreliable, and we seek resolution to our problems from others.

This is where we get into so much trouble: We have low expectations of God, and high expectations of people. Deep down, we don't really expect God to act on our behalf, so we go out and focus our efforts on getting other people to sort out the problems in our lives. All too often, they let us down, and God never gets the opportunity to intervene because we never truly entrusted the problem to Him. Then all we are left with is bitter disappointment.

Jeremiah 17:5-8 “This is what the LORD says: ‘Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the LORD. That person will be like a bush in the wastelands; they will not see prosperity when it comes. They will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives. But blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.’ ” (NIV)

Psalms 41:9-12 “Even my close friend, someone I trusted, one who shared my bread, has turned against me. But may you have mercy on me, LORD; raise me up... Because of my integrity you uphold me and set me in your presence forever.” (NIV)

If we want to experience Joy and Peace in this life, we must learn to flip our expectations around. And this reversal must be genuine. Not just a tip of the hat to the big guy upstairs or an empty proclamation of trust that our actions blatantly contradict. We must have genuinely *high expectations of God*, and *low expectations of others*.

Let's begin with our expectations of God. What can we legitimately expect from our Creator as we live out our lives in a fallen world? First, we can with absolute certainty know without a shadow of a doubt that *God hears*. The One who created the heavens and the earth hears our prayers!

Psalm 4:3 "... The LORD hears when I call to Him." (NASB)

Jeremiah 33:3 "Call to Me and I will answer you, and I will tell you great and mighty things, which you do not know." (NASB)

Psalm 116:1-7 "I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live... The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion... when I was in great need, he saved me. Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the LORD has been good to you." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Psalm 40:1-4 "I waited patiently for the LORD; and He inclined to me and heard my cry. He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay, and He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; many will see and fear and will trust in the LORD. How blessed is the man who has made the LORD his trust, and has not turned to the proud, nor to those who lapse into falsehood." (NIV)

How often do you wonder if the person you have been earnestly pouring your heart out to for the last hour has heard a word you said? How often do you question whether what you've said has been understood, or will be remembered, or will be valued? With people, our doubts are often justified, but with God, they are wondrously unmerited. God has given us His eternal, unbreakable Word that when we humbly call out to Him, He always listens, with unwavering focus and attention to every detail.

Psalm 66:1-20 "Shout for joy to God, all the earth! Sing the glory of his name; make his praise glorious... I cried out to him with my mouth... God has surely listened and has heard my prayer. Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!" (NIV)

Psalm 142:1-6 "I cry aloud to the LORD; I lift up my voice to the LORD for mercy. I pour out before him my complaint; before him I tell my trouble. When my spirit grows faint within me, it is you who watch over my way... I cry to you, LORD; I say, 'You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.' Listen to my cry, for I am in desperate need..." (NIV)

Matthew 6:8 "... your Father knows what you need before you ask Him." (NASB)

Isaiah 58:2-11 "... seek Me day by day, and delight to know My ways... delight in the nearness of God... Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth; and your righteousness will go before you; the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer... And the LORD will continually guide you, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, and give strength to your bones; and you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail." (NASB)

Luke 18:1-8 “Now He (*Jesus*) was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, saying, ‘In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, “Give me legal protection from my opponent.” For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, “Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.”’ And the Lord said, ‘Hear what the unrighteous judge said; now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?’ ” (NASB)

When we earnestly pray, we can be assured that God is right there next to us, listening intently to every word. And more importantly, God understands the unspoken language of the heart, where our inmost longings and desires resound. As our Savior, He loves us passionately! As our Creator, He knows us intimately! And as the omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent Lord of all creation, He understands what we sometimes can't find the words to express. In our apparent fumbling for the right words, God's loving eyes see straight into the hearts of His beloved children, and He comprehends with perfect clarity what we are trying to express. In other words, He gets it! Every time!

1 Chronicles 28:9 “... serve Him with a whole heart and a willing mind; for the LORD searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will reject you...” (NASB)

Proverbs 20:27 “The lamp of the LORD searches the spirit of a man; it searches out his inmost being.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Psalms 139:1-24 “O LORD, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You understand my thought from afar. You scrutinize my path and my lying down, and are intimately acquainted with all my ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O LORD, You know it all... For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother's womb... Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.” (NASB)

And when we cry out to Him with humble hearts, there is another thing we can confidently expect from Him: *God acts*. God doesn't sit next to us, absorb every detail of our thoughts, words, and deepest emotions, then summarize these things in a sterile memo to the file and put it in a “to do” box. He immediately goes to work on our behalf.

Psalm 65:1-5 “Praise awaits you, O God... O you who hear prayer, to you all men will come... You answer us with awesome deeds of righteousness...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Psalm 102:1-17 “Hear my prayer, LORD; let my cry for help come to you. Do not hide your face from me when I am in distress. Turn your ear to me; when I call, answer me quickly. For my days vanish like smoke; my bones burn like glowing embers. My heart is blighted and withered like grass; I forget to eat my food. In my distress I groan aloud and am reduced to skin and bones ... I lie awake; I have become like a bird alone on a roof... I eat ashes as my food and mingle my drink with tears... But you, LORD, sit enthroned forever; your renown endures through all generations. You will arise and have compassion... the LORD will... respond to the prayer of the destitute...” (NIV)

Psalm 38:15 “LORD, I wait for you; you will answer, Lord my God.” (NIV)

But what exactly can we count on Him to do? What acts do we have His assurance He will perform? Will He give us whatever we ask for, every time, without delay?

No. He would be a really horrible God if He did. With our limited understanding of God, ourselves, and the world around us, we *never* know what is best for us in His plan (unless it is something like the “declared will of God” we looked at in Chapter 6). His plan is too complex and subtle for our finite minds to even begin to comprehend. How could we reasonably expect to know what heartache is unnecessary, or what blessing is needed, in order for us to successfully play our unique part in His holy plan for all creation?

Job 38:1 through 40:8 “Then the LORD answered Job... ‘Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely, you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone – while the morning stars sang together and the angels shouted for joy?... Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place... Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep?... Have you seen the gates of the shadow of death? Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth? Tell me if you know all this. What is the way to the abode of light? And where does the darkness reside? Can you take them to their places? Do you know the paths to their dwellings? Surely you know for you were already born! You have lived so many years!... Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades? Can you loose the cords of Orion? Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons?... Did you give the horse his strength or clothe his neck with a flowing mane?... Does the eagle soar at your command...? Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!... Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?’ ” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Isaiah 40:25-31 “‘To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal’ says the Holy One. Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because

of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing. Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, 'My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God'? Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." (NIV)

The best way for God to destroy us is to give us everything we ask for, every time, immediately. We see this clearly in parenting our own children here on earth. If we gave them everything they asked for, they would become malnourished, toothless, illiterate tyrants sitting around in their own filth, with all the candy, playtime, and lack of responsibility anyone could ever ask for. They would never be able to accomplish anything useful in their lives, and they would never be happy.

Proverbs 30:7-9 "Two things I ask of you, LORD; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the LORD?' " (NIV)

It's the same way with us. God is much too good of a parent to give us everything we want. He adores us, with a love more powerful than we can even begin to understand. And sometimes He absolutely does give us exactly what we want, exactly when we want it, but here's the distinction we have to understand: He only does so when it is in keeping with His plan.

1 John 5:14 "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us." (NIV)

God listens intently to our humble prayers, and He immediately acts decisively in response to them. But how He acts depends upon His overall plan for us as individuals and human history as a whole. It may be in keeping with His plan to give us exactly what we ask for. Or His plan might demand exactly the opposite, or something totally unexpected. We, as the instrument, can never be quite certain what notes the Composer will call upon us to play.

And so we sometimes doubt the composition. We hear a different tune in our heads, and when the music is not what we expect, we are presented with a choice: To play the music that unfolds before us, or attempt to take the melody in a different creative direction.

We all know what happens when we go our own way. There is discord and disintegration. The music devolves, and we can try to scratch out our little tune as loudly as we can, and shut our ears to the rest of the orchestra, but ultimately we are overwhelmed and left behind.

The much better but much more demanding alternative is to carry on with the score as each new, undiscovered page is turned, and play whatever is presented to us with everything we have. It's scary to sight read an unrehearsed masterpiece in front of a packed house, but if we maintain our confidence in the Composer, and allow ourselves to get caught up in the music, it becomes transcendent.

That's what God wants our lives to be – a sublime symphony where we become an instrument that discovers its place in the score, and plays its part with an unwavering dedication to the spontaneously unfolding melodies and a confidence in and adoration for the Conductor. Then we play our parts with artistry and power, and when the music ends, we can look back over the score and see how the Composer's vision was so much better than our own.

God hears and God acts, but He doesn't promise to do what we want. *God promises to do what is best.* He gives us His absolute Word that after listening intently to our words (and even more closely to our hearts), He will rise up and take divine action. But that action will not necessarily be what we in our limited perspective desire. It will *always* be what God in His infinite wisdom deems to be the absolute best action considering His holy, loving plan for our individual lives and all humanity.

Jeremiah 29:11-13 “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future... You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.’” (NIV)

Proverbs 16:4-20 “The LORD works out everything to its proper end – even the wicked for a day of disaster. The LORD detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished... blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD.” (NIV)

Romans 8:28 “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” (NASB)

1 Peter 4:19 “Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

That's the high expectation we can have of our God, and isn't that so much better than getting our own way? Isn't it better to know that, after we make our humble petitions to our Heavenly Father, we can trust with absolutely certainty that He will act and do what is exactly *right*, rather than exactly what is requested? Shouldn't we get down on our knees and thank God for following His plan, rather than our own?

This is the faith we are called to, and if we truly believe these things, we should be ecstatic with delight. We should burst with Joy and Peace, because we have the confident assurance that no matter what is going on in our lives, and no matter how God responds to our prayers, the One who spoke the universe into existence and will one day make all things new and all things right is acting decisively in our lives to bring about His holy, loving purpose, which entails happiness and blessing in this life and in eternity that are so absolutely marvelous, our finite minds literally cannot image them, let alone comprehend them.

Luke 6:22,23 “Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven...” (NIV)

Romans 8:18 “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 4:17,18 “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (NASB)

That’s exactly how God wants us to live our lives – with the highest expectations that He *hears* and He *acts* and He is doing what is *best* in our lives. And all we are called to do in return is trust Him and love one another, resting in His faithfulness and love. Whether our lives are in a season of calm and abundance, or a season of turmoil and need, God wants us trusting in His holiness and love, with an unwavering assurance that He is bringing about His best and our faithfulness will be rewarded.

Micah 7:7,8 “But as for me, I will watch expectantly for the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me. Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy. Though I fall I will rise; though I dwell in darkness, the LORD is a light for me.” (NASB)

Psalms 25:1-3 “In you, LORD my God, I put my trust... No one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame...” (NASB)

Hebrews 11:6 “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (NIV)

Isaiah 49:23 “... those who hope in me (*God*) will not be disappointed.” (NIV)

Before we move on to our expectations of others, take a moment and truly reflect on the concept of God’s *best*. It’s so easy to gloss over that word, and take it as a half-hearted pat on the back and an admonishment to soldier on. What is God’s best for you? What does that idea mean specifically to you? If you could envision God’s best, what would it be?

Know this: *Your thinking is too small*, not because something is wrong with you, but because mankind has simply not been empowered yet to fully grasp God’s best.

Instead, we are called to trust that it's what God will provide, in this life and in eternity, and the meaning, satisfaction, and blessing that it brings will be overwhelmingly deserving of our faith. Don't miss God's best!

1 Corinthians 2:9 “but just as it is written, ‘THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.’ ” (NASB)

Now let's look at our expectations of others. What can we reasonably expect from other people as we live out our lives in a fallen world? Please consider this question carefully. It's not asking what our goals and standards should be in relationships. Nor is it asking what behaviors we should expect from ourselves. It's asking: What can we count on in this life in our dealings with other people? What can we have unwavering confidence we will experience as we interact with others?

The sobering answer is: We can count on other people to sin and fall short of the glory of God. God's Word is very clear in Romans 3:23. It says: “*All* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (emphasis added). Not some people or most people, but all people. If we are looking for the common thread that runs throughout humanity, something everyone shares no matter who they are, this is it. Everyone sins and everyone falls short.

Romans 3:23 “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” (NIV)

That's a really important truth to consider when you are trying to decide where you are going to place your trust. We have God, who we know will never fail us no matter what, and then we have people, who we know will eventually always fail us no matter what. That makes it pretty easy to know how to measure our expectations.

If we want to know Joy and Peace in this life, *we must learn to have low expectations of others*. At first, that probably sounds kind of harsh, but please understand what this means. It does not mean to have low standards in choosing spouses, friends, or business partners, etc. It does not mean to have low standards for ourselves. On the contrary, God calls us to have very high standards in whom we choose to associate with and how we choose to behave in this world.

Proverbs 12:26 “The righteous choose their friends carefully...” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 15:33 “Do not be deceived: ‘Bad company corrupts good morals.’ ” (NASB)

Proverbs 13:20 “He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.” (NASB)

Philippians 2:14-16 “Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life...” (NASB)

1 Peter 2:10-17 “... you are the people of God... Live such good lives among the pagans that... they may see your good deeds and glorify God... Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men... For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

This also emphatically does not mean to have a low regard for others, in the sense that we look down our noses at them with self-righteous judgment and hypocrisy. It simply means we are not to place our ultimate confidence and trust in people. We are not to build our hopes and dreams upon the integrity and faithfulness of others, or even in ourselves. That is a perfect recipe for disappointment and disillusionment.

Matthew 7:1-5 “Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” (NASB)

Proverbs 3:5,6 “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” (NIV)

You and I and everyone else on this planet are extremely fragile creatures. We are “sheep gone astray.” We all have our strengths and weaknesses, and some are certainly more trustworthy than others. But no one is perfect, and even the greatest men and women in the Bible had moments where they utterly failed and even betrayed the people who were earnestly counting on them.

Isaiah 53:6 “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way...” (NIV)

1 John 1:8 “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.” (NASB)

1 Kings 8:46 “... for there is no one who does not sin...” (NIV)

Ecclesiastes 7:20 “Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins.” (NASB)

God wants (and even demands) His children to work together. He instructs us to counsel, encourage, and admonish one another with a Christ-like love. But He also very clearly warns us not to put our faith in one another. The prize of our faith is something God jealously reserves for Himself only. Our faith, trust, and confidence must be directed towards God alone, while our patience, kindness, and forgiveness are shared with the world around us as we journey into God’s light.

1 Corinthians 2:5 "... your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God." (NASB – 1975 ed.)

Jeremiah 17:5-8 "This is what the LORD says: 'Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the LORD. That person will be like a bush in the wastelands; they will not see prosperity when it comes. They will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives. But blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.'" (NIV)

Hebrews 10:24,25 "and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another..." (NASB)

Colossians 3:15-17 "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts... Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another... Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father." (NASB)

1 Thessalonians 5:5-28 "You are all sons of the light and sons of the day... Therefore encourage one another and build each other up... Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus... Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil... May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and He will do it... The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Once again, this is completely the opposite of the world's wisdom. The world tells us to believe in ourselves and have faith in our fellow man, and that sounds somewhat spiritual and uplifting. But look at human history, and consider your own experiences. In the long run, has anyone ever really benefitted from placing their faith in anything or anyone other than God?

1 Corinthians 3:19 "For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight..." (NIV)

When we gather in all of our expectations, and redistribute them as directed by God's Word, with every ounce being poured into God and not a drop left over for others, something wonderful happens: We become *filled with power* and we are *utterly set free*.

When we make God and God alone the rock upon which we plant our feet and take our stand and speak the truth in love, we become impervious to the storms and assaults of the fallen world. Our faith becomes a mighty shield that protects our hearts from all disappointments. Our minds become sharp, hope-filled swords that

cannot become dulled or disillusioned. And the love that pours out of our hearts and minds is filled with a power that nothing in this world can withstand. Everything we are shines forth as an unquenchable light that defeats the darkness each of us is born into.

Psalm 62:1-12 “My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken... Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken. My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge... One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong, and that you, O Lord, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Isaiah 26:3,4 “The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect peace, because he trusts in You. Trust in the LORD forever, for in GOD the LORD, we have an everlasting Rock.” (NASB)

Psalm 46:1-3 “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains quake at its swelling pride.” (NASB)

Ephesians 6:10-17 “Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might... take up the full armor of God, so that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm therefore, HAVING GIRDED YOUR LOINS WITH TRUTH, and HAVING PUT ON THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, and having shod YOUR FEET WITH THE PREPARATION OF THE GOSPEL OF PEACE; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take the HELMET OF SALVATION, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” (NASB)

Isaiah 42:5,6 “This is what God the LORD says – the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: ‘I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you... a light...’ ” (NIV)

And when we relieve others of the burden of our expectations, suddenly we are free to truly love them. They are no longer the idol we cling to and demand happiness from. They are fellow heirs of God’s promises we can link arms with and share in the bounties of God’s grace. They are companions with whom we can join in expressing our love and gratitude for the God we trust. We can have a fellowship with them that is not based upon mutual dependence, but rather shared abundance. They are no longer the source of our salvation. They are, like us, the objects of God’s salvation.

1 Peter 3:7 “You husbands... live with your wives in an understanding way... and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered.” (NASB)

Galatians 6:2-5 “Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ... But each one must examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another. For each one will bear his own load.” (NASB)

And that makes it so much easier to forgive them! When we enter into our relationships acknowledging that the other person is just as weak and fragile as we are, and that at some point if we are together long enough they will fail us, just as we will surely fail them, then when the inevitable disappointment arrives, we are not somehow shocked, as if this was something we could never have imagined in our wildest dreams. Of course your spouse, parent, sibling, child, friend, pastor, teacher, stockbroker, yoga instructor, etc. failed you. They are human, just like you. Talk to them. Gently let them know how they’ve hurt you. Seek to be reconciled. And forgive, as God has forgiven you.

Luke 17:3,4 “... If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” (NASB)

Ephesians 4:1-32 “... live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love... to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it... to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work... put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. ‘In your anger do not sin’: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold... Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen... Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (NIV)

As we realign our expectations, placing all of our hope in God and none of it in others, disappointment and disillusionment lose their power over us. It’s impossible

to be disappointed in an outcome and sink into a disillusioned funk when you are trusting that, whatever comes, it's God's best for your life. There is a total liberation from the worry and uncertainty that comes from placing your trust in others. Our confidence is that no matter what each day brings, God will use it for our best, and so our expectations are always met.

Joshua 1:9 "... Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go." (NIV)

Isaiah 41:10-14 "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand... For I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, do not fear; I will help you. Do not be afraid..." (NIV)

Philippians 1:18-28 "... I (*Paul*) will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me (*imprisonment*) will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me. Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ... stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved – and that by God." (NIV)

Then, as apparent disasters strike, they do not become spiritual crises that destroy our faith. Instead, they are received as mighty opportunities to demonstrate our faith and serve our God. Instead of ripping any semblance of happiness from our lives and leaving us in a well of sadness, these experiences actually contribute to the beauty of our lives, as we meet them with faith, hope, and love and bring glory to God, light to the world, and receive from the One to whom we have entrusted our expectations Joy inexpressible and Peace surpassing comprehension.

Psalm 5:2-12 "Hear my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray... in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly... Lead me, LORD, in your righteousness... make your way straight before me... let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in you. Surely, LORD, you bless the righteous; you surround them with your favor as with a shield." (NIV)

These principles are easy to distort. If you are unemployed, having high expectations of God does not mean sitting on the couch watching TV in your underwear for weeks on end, expecting God to miraculously bring you a job. It means looking really hard for a job, then trusting God with whatever happens. And having low expectations of others does not mean having no hope *for* others who are in a bad place. It means having high hopes and standards for others, and doing all we reasonably can to help lift them up, while at the same time, never placing our hope *in* others.

Hebrews 3:12,13 “See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” (NIV)

Life in a fallen world is subtle. There are countless fine lines to draw, and there are always two sides to weigh and consider. As we saw earlier, knowing Joy and Peace in a fallen world is an art, not a science. And vital to this art is understanding duality and balance.

Duality & Balance.

Throughout the scriptures, we are admonished to grow up. We are called to advance from the foundation of the elementary principles of God’s Word to the more complex and subtle. That doesn’t mean we abandon the elementary principles and leave them behind, but rather we should carry them forward with us and build upon them as we grow into the spiritually mature men and women God wants us to be. We are called to gain the wisdom that comes from maturity, and true, fully formed spiritual wisdom requires a very specific set of skills: We must learn to accurately perceive the often conflicting realities of life in a fallen world, and find an equilibrium where these things coexist in our thinking without one side overshadowing the other and throwing our lives out of balance.

So what exactly does that rather complicated sentence mean? Let’s start with the idea of perception. God wants us to grow into men and women with true *insight*. One thing this fallen world does extremely well is cause many of us to journey through life in a state of perpetual delusion. We never truly perceive what this life is all about, and our lives become a never-ending procession from one false hope to another. We never discover who God truly is, so we are unable to truly understand ourselves or the world around us. We get lost in a maze of funhouse mirrors that misshapes everything we perceive, which eventually leaves us isolated and despondent.

Ecclesiastes 1:1-14 “The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem (*i.e.* Solomon): ‘Meaningless! Meaningless!... Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless. What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil

under the sun?... All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, "Look! This is something new"?... I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens... I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind." (NIV)

John 16:2,3 "... an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God. These things they will do because they have not known the Father or Me (*Jesus*)." (NASB)

Proverbs 16:25 "There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death." (NASB)

But when we ask God for true insight, diligently study His Word, and seek the guidance of His Spirit, then those things that distort our vision get shattered and swept away, and our sight comes into focus. We begin to see God as He truly is, and grow confident and secure in His holiness and love. We see ourselves as sinners that fall short, who have been graciously washed clean and granted an eternal destiny in Christ. We see others as similarly lost, but with the same divine potential, and so we learn to forgive and when appropriate hold others accountable. And we see the world as the ground upon which we are to take our stand, but not make our home.

James 1:5 "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him." (NASB)

Proverbs 2:3-11 "indeed, if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will... find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding... Then you will understand what is right and just and fair – every good path. For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you." (NIV)

Psalms 119:9-165 "How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Your word... Your word I have treasured in my heart... Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your law... Strengthen me according to Your word... I shall run the way of Your commandments, for You will enlarge my heart... Teach me good discernment and knowledge, for I believe in Your commandments... The law of Your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces... How sweet are Your words to my taste! Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth! From Your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way. Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path... You are my hiding place and my shield; I wait for Your word. Depart from me, evildoers, that I may observe the commandments of my God... The unfolding of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple... My eyes anticipate the night watches, that I may meditate on Your word... The sum of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous ordinances is everlasting... my heart stands in awe of Your words. I rejoice at Your word, as

one who finds great spoil... Those who love Your law have great peace, and nothing causes them to stumble.” (NASB)

Ephesians 1:18,19 “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe...” (NASB)

Ecclesiastes 2:26 “To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness...” (NIV)

2 Timothy 2:7 “Reflect on what I (*Paul*) am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.” (NIV)

And as our insight develops, we start to notice something quite remarkable. There is a *duality* to life in a fallen world. In almost everything we come to accurately perceive, there arises two apparently conflicting realities that at first blush may seem to be mutually exclusive. But in truth, these things are interconnected and interdependent – part of one whole – like two sides of one coin. And together, when in balance, they unlock the mysteries of life in a fallen world.

Philippians 1:9,10 “And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,” (NIV)

Proverbs 20:5 “The purposes of a person’s heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out.” (NIV)

Ecclesiastes 7:18 “... Whoever fears God will avoid all extremes.” (NIV)

Let’s look at some examples. Consider the duality of the nature of God. He is infinite, absolute holiness and love. What two characteristics could be more at odds? A holy God absolutely and utterly rejects a sinful creation. And a loving God refuses to abandon it with equal measure. But as we come to understand grace, we discover how God can love a sinner and remain holy. And then our only genuine response (when we are humble) can be to fall down and worship at the feet of our awesome Creator.

Isaiah 1:13-18 “I (*God*) cannot endure iniquity... your sins are as scarlet... they are red like crimson...” (NASB)

Proverbs 3:32 “For the devious are an abomination to the LORD...” (NASB)

Jeremiah 31:3 “... I (*God*) have loved you with an everlasting love...” (NIV)

Lamentations 3:31,32 “For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though He brings grief, He will show compassion, so great is His unfailing love.” (NIV)

Romans 8:38,39 “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NIV)

Psalms 145:8-21 “The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made... The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does. The LORD

upholds all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down... You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing... The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them. The LORD watches over all who love him... My mouth will speak in praise of the LORD. Let every creature praise his holy name for ever and ever.” (NIV)

Psalm 30:1-12 “I will exalt you, LORD, for you lifted me out of the depths... I called to you for help, and you healed me... To you, LORD, I called; to the Lord I cried for mercy... You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. LORD my God, I will praise you forever.” (NIV)

But what if we get these characteristics of God out of balance? If we focus only on His holiness, then we can see God as a wrathful and unapproachable tyrant, and start to lean towards legalism, where we are always trying to fearfully appease the perfect God with our strict adherence to His many rules, because if we don't, we're afraid He will squash us like a bug. On the other hand, if we emphasize His love, then we can see God as an undemanding and all-inclusive teddy bear, and start to lean towards licentiousness, where we lazily stand for nothing and hold neither ourselves nor others accountable for our choices, because we expect to receive God's blessing no matter what.

Isaiah 29:13 “The Lord says: ‘These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.’ ” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Colossians 2:2-23 “... be encouraged... attaining to all the wealth that comes from full assurance of understanding... so that no one may delude you with persuasive argument... See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ... Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize... why... do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, ‘Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!’... in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion... but are of no value...” (NASB)

Hebrews 12:14-29 “Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one... is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done... let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire.’ ” (NIV)

Hebrews 10:26-31 “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment... For we know him who said, ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ and again, ‘The Lord will judge his people.’ It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (NIV)

But when we keep these things in balance, and understand that *both* God's holiness *and* love are absolute and infinite, and neither can be emphasized over the other, then we are able to revere and respect His holiness and hold our standards high, while at the same time rest in and receive comfort from His love, knowing that when we fail our God will always forgive a repentant heart.

This guides our behavior as we journey through life. If we have a choice to make, we seriously consider what will glorify our holy God according to His high standards. We desire to be holy, just as He is holy. We take our stand and speak the truth in love, because this is what is expected of the children of the holy God. And we are filled with reverence for the righteous, almighty judge of heaven and earth.

1 Peter 1:15,16 "But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'" (NIV)

Philippians 2:14-16 "Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life..." (NASB)

Proverbs 22:4 "The reward of humility and the fear of the LORD are riches, honor and life." (NIV)

Psalms 98:1-9 "Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things... for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity." (NIV)

But if we fail, we do not shrink in fear of an unforgiving, angry God. On the contrary, we run to Him, knowing He delights to forgive and restore the genuinely contrite, because He loves us despite our sin. And this engenders an authentic adoration and love for the merciful, faithful redeemer of all mankind.

Psalms 86:5 "You, Lord, are forgiving and good, abounding in love to all who call to you." (NIV)

Psalms 32:1-11 "Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered...and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.' And you forgave the guilt of my sin. Therefore let all the faithful pray to you while you may be found... Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD'S unfailing love surrounds the one who trusts in him. Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!" (NIV)

1 John 2:1 "... if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;" (NASB)

And together these things allow for a genuine relationship with our holy, loving Creator. We know Him as He truly is. Our admiration and adoration for Him are properly balanced. We do not lean one way or the other, and experience the unsteadiness that results from placing an undue emphasis on either His holiness or His love. Like a tightrope walker with a long, even balancing pole, we are able to walk the narrow path of life without slipping off either edge.

Matthew 7:13,14 “... wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” (NIV)

Now let’s consider the duality of who we are in Christ. On the one hand, we are a new creation, washed clean and set free. On the other hand, we are broken sinners, prone to wander. If we emphasize either of these perfectly true descriptions of ourselves over the other, we get into all kinds of trouble.

2 Corinthians 5:17,18 “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Isaiah 53:6 “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way...” (NIV)

If our focus is solely on our position as heirs of God’s kingdom, eternally secure and bound for heaven, we can easily become self-righteous, judgmental, hypocritical, and just plain overconfident. Then when we inevitably fail, we are shocked and bewildered. And we are pummeled with doubt.

Matthew 7:1-5 “Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” (NASB)

Proverbs 19:3 “A person’s own folly leads to their ruin, yet their heart rages against the LORD.” (NIV)

If our focus is on our nature to sin, we can easily become discouraged and unmotivated. We suffer from low self-esteem, and never develop a healthy sense of self-worth and personal dignity. Then it becomes impossible to serve God. We just shrink from Him in fear.

Matthew 25:14-30 “... a man going on a journey... called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags,

and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.' His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' The man with two bags of gold also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.' His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.' His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' " (NIV)

Romans 8:1-39 "... there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus... You... are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit... you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship... The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory... And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose... What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

But if we humbly accept that we are both of these things, God's precious children born into a living hope, and fragile vessels utterly dependent upon grace, then we benefit from both the confidence we gain from knowing whom we belong to, and the humility that comes from acknowledging our supreme vulnerability. We boldly walk the paths set before us, but without any sense of superiority or invincibility. We are able to point others towards Christ with the assurance of a member of His family, and show compassion and empathy for the weaknesses of others, because we know that these same weaknesses resides within us.

1 Peter 1:3,4 "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope... to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you," (NASB)

2 Corinthians 4:6-10 "For God... has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves... that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body." (NASB)

And through this balance we are once again enabled to enjoy a relationship with God that is real and alive. We stray neither towards self-righteousness nor self-abasement. We remain firmly grounded on the narrow edge of an understanding of self that is overwhelmingly encouraged by our freedom and high position in Christ, but also tempered with an unwavering realization of our endless need for grace. We rejoice in how far Jesus has lifted us up, and we remember how easily we can plummet down to where we were. And in this place of equilibrium, we are able to truly see, love, and serve God.

2 Corinthians 6:1-10 "... we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain... giving no cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry will not be discredited, but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger, in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love, in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left, by glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; regarded as deceivers and yet true; as unknown yet well-known, as dying yet behold, we live; as punished yet not put to death, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things." (NASB)

Another striking duality relates to how we are to love other people. On the one hand, we are unquestionably called to forgive those who wrong us. And we are equally called to hold others accountable for their wrongs. How do we reconcile these two seemingly opposing commands?

As we saw earlier in this study, if we are all forgiveness and no accountability, we end up becoming extremely effective facilitators of sin. We put our arms around others, confirm our love and unequivocal acceptance of them no matter what, and then pat them on the back and send them off to walk down a destructive road leading straight into the darkness of the fallen world, with our blessing. And then of course we congratulate ourselves for how “loving” we are, when in truth, as the scriptures clearly reveal, we actually share in their sin, because instead of diverting them from the path of ruin, we assisted them down it.

Proverbs 27:5,6 “Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.” (NIV)

Matthew 18:15-17 “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.” (NIV)

Leviticus 19:17 “... Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt.” (NIV)

The other extreme is all accountability and no forgiveness. We are only too happy to point out the faults of others, and we do so with anger, bitterness, and resentment. Instead of becoming the light in the darkness we are supposed to be, we become the self-righteous, judgmental hypocrites who are perhaps the greatest enemy of the cause of Christ.

Luke 17:3,4 “... If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” (NASB)

Romans 2:1-4 “Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things... do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?” (NASB)

1 Timothy 5:13 “... they get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Ephesians 4:31,32 “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (NIV)

But when we both forgive and hold others accountable, then we are able to take our stand in this world and speak the truth in love. Forgiveness ensures we do not slip into all the problems that come from an angry, wounded heart. Accountability

ensures we don't sit idly by while someone turns their back on God and takes off at a sprint.

Balance in both of these virtues allows us to truly love other people. It's not love to waive at someone who runs over you as they speed into the darkness and yell, "I forgive you! Do whatever makes you happy!" Nor is it love to curse them as you point out their folly with your middle finger. Love is admonishing with humility and gentleness. It's casting aside hurt feelings and speaking truthfully, with courage (but not aggression), conviction (but not arrogance) and empathy (but not compromise).

2 Timothy 2:24-26 "The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses..." (NASB)

1 Peter 3:15,16 "But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander." (NIV)

And this type of courageous but humble truthfulness is what creates meaningful relationships. We respect those who can look us in the eye and speak the honest truth in a kind and gentle way. They become our confidants, the ones we turn to when we need wise counsel, and they become our cohorts, the ones we call up when we just want to have a good time. They cause both the "yes men" and critics in our lives to lose their power over us. And this can only happen when we balance the virtues of forgiveness and accountability.

Proverbs 28:23 "He who rebukes a man will afterward find more favor than he who flatters with the tongue." (NASB)

Here is another duality in scripture. We are told to come to Christ like a child, and we are commanded to put away childish things. How can we do that?

Most of us know from our common experience how wonderful (and sometimes frustrating) children can be. There is something absolutely delightful about the wonder we see in children as they experience the beautiful things in life for the first time. There is also something profoundly moving about the trust we see in their eyes as they look up at us, take our hands, and without fear walk with us down what is for them a new and unknown road.

These are the qualities God absolutely wants us to hold on to as we walk with Him. He wants us to keep a child-like wonder as we experience the legitimate beauty that is in our world. And as we experience the legitimate sadness in the world, He wants us

to hold on to a child-like faith that trusts without wavering that wherever the Father leads is ultimately meant for our good.

Matthew 18:1-5 “At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.’” (NIV)

Matthew 19:13,14 “Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them. Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’” (NIV)

What we are to avoid is being childish (as opposed to child-like); that is, short-tempered, inattentive, selfish, and unreasonable. Temper tantrums and poor judgment are not qualities that should define followers of Jesus, and this is where maturity comes into play. God wants us to grow out of the shortcomings of childhood. He wants us disciplined, well-informed, and wise.

1 Corinthians 13:11 “When I (*Paul*) was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things.” (NASB)

Ephesians 4:1-15 “... live a life worthy of the calling you have received... equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.” (NIV)

But He doesn’t want us grumpy, worn out, and defeated. This is the dark side of growing up that all too many of us fall into. Instead of putting away childish things, we put away child-like things, and as time flies by we retain all the unwanted traits of youth in flabby bodies and jaded minds.

Ephesians 4:18,19 “They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Deuteronomy 28:62-67 “... because you did not obey the LORD your God... the LORD will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing

heart. You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life. In the morning you will say, ‘If only it were evening!’ and in the evening, ‘If only it were morning!’ – because of the terror that will fill your hearts...” (NIV)

A wise balance of the good qualities of youth and maturity leads to a life filled with meaning and satisfaction. We retain the wonder and humble faith of a child, so we don’t become cynical and dead to hope. And we temper this with the wisdom and hard work of an adult, so we don’t live out our lives in a fairytale land as we scream for other people to come wipe our bottoms. Together, these virtues allow us to most effectively serve God, with the optimism and enthusiasm of youth, and the perspective and tenacity of adulthood. And in our service, we find the Joy and Peace for which we long.

2 Corinthians 4:1-18 “... we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God... For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body... Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” (NIV)

1 Peter 1:6-8 “... you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory,” (NASB)

Perhaps the starkest of all dualities in life is the breathtaking beauty and heartrending sadness that coexist in a world created by God but inhabited by a fallen creation. If we look around us, every day we can see examples of glorious beauty in the world.

We can also see things of unspeakable sadness. As we saw earlier in this study, both of these things have tremendous power to stir our hearts, and when in balance they whet our souls to a razor's edge, inspiring us to serve the God we love and others in need with great effectiveness.

When out of balance, the power of these things drives us quickly and decisively over the edge. If we become enamored by the beauty in the world, whether it is nature or romantic love or items of luxury, etc., they eventually become our gods. Our lives revolve around them, and they become our only pursuit. We shut our eyes to the sadness in the world, and attempt to fill up the emptiness within us with whatever we find beautiful.

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 *"I (Solomon, perhaps the most powerful and wealthy man to ever live) said to myself, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself.' And behold, it too was futility... I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; I made gardens and parks for myself, and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees... I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. Also, I collected for myself silver and gold, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself... the pleasures of men – many concubines. Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem... And all that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure... I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun."* (NASB)

If our focus is on the sadness in the world, whether it is crime, war, disease, or poverty, etc., we quickly lose hope. We become angry, combative, and bitter, and despair of ever discovering anything that makes life worth living. Our cynicism knows no end, and our attitude towards God and others is indelibly stained by ridicule and blame. And with the loss of hope, we give up trying to find anything to fill up our emptiness, and instead choose to wallow in it.

1 Thessalonians 4:13 "Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to... grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope." (NIV)

Job 15:20-26 "... the wicked man suffers torment... Distress and anguish fill him with terror; troubles overwhelm him... because he shakes his fist at God and vaunts himself against the Almighty, defiantly charging against him..." (NIV)

Proverbs 19:3 "A person's own folly leads to their ruin, yet their heart rages against the LORD." (NIV)

Psalms 73:3-8 "... the wicked... pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits. They scoff, and speak with malice..." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

But when we keep these things in proper balance, with a mature appreciation for the beauty in life and an equal concern for the sadness, then we become filled with inspiration and determination. The beauty in the world inspires us, and fills us with an appreciation for the One who created it. The sadness in the world also moves us, but instead of leading to despair, it motivates us to do our part to bring about meaningful change. Neither beauty nor sadness creates barriers to accomplishing God's plan for our lives. Instead, both provide momentum towards it, because we keep them in proper balance.

Psalm 8:1-9 “LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory in the heavens... When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet: all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild, the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas. LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (NIV)

Psalm 73:1-28 “Surely God is good to... those who are pure in heart! But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling... For I was envious of the arrogant as I saw the prosperity of the wicked... They mock and wickedly speak of oppression... When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight until I came into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end. Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction... When my heart was embittered and I was pierced within, then I was senseless and ignorant. I was like a beast before You. Nevertheless I am continually with You; You have taken hold of my right hand. With Your counsel You will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. For, behold, those who are far from You will perish; You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to You. But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all Your works.” (NASB)

There is duality in true happiness, with the two opposite poles being Joy and Peace. These are not necessarily in opposition to one another, but they are very different expressions of happiness, and if we focus on one over the other, then we quickly lose our equilibrium.

Joy is enthusiasm for life. It's the spark in our eyes and the spring in our step. It's the more *outwardly* emotive of the two. It's our fire and passion.

Isaiah 42:10,11 “Sing to the LORD a new song... Let the people... sing for joy; let them shout from the mountaintops.” (NIV)

Peace is satisfaction with life. It's the depth of our eyes and the firmness of our step. It's more *inwardly* emotive; an expression of the steadfastness and contentment God gives those who trust Him.

Isaiah 26:3,4 “The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect peace, because he trusts in You. Trust in the LORD forever, for in GOD the LORD, we have an everlasting Rock.” (NASB)

When in balance, these things complement and feed one another. Joy can be experienced and expressed in the most unlikely of circumstances (such as times of great trial and testing), because it has a foundation of Peace that cannot be shaken. Peace also secures Joy in times of abundance, because there is no cause to fear the uncertainty of the future. We know God will always be there no matter what comes, so we can enjoy the present.

2 Corinthians 7:4 “... in all our troubles my (*Paul's*) joy knows no bounds.” (NIV)
2 Thessalonians 3:16 “Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance. The Lord be with you all!” (NASB)

If these things get out of balance, they tend to cancel each other out. When we are all emotive Joy, we tend to lose the foundation of reasoned Peace from which Joy is able to securely flow. Our emotions run out of steam and insecurities set in. We end up feeling lost and alone.

If we are all about Peace, but never feel and express the Joy that is rightfully ours as children of the living God, we become stoic and hardened. We take life on the chin like a good soldier, but never enjoy it, as God greatly desires. Our lives fail to ignite, the way men and women with a destiny in Christ should, and again, we end up feeling lost and alone.

God doesn't want us running around with our hands in the air cackling like a chicken because everything is so awesome and we just know our spiritual exuberance will never end. Nor does He want us sitting in a corner gritting our teeth ready to endure the constant hardships of life, which, even if they are not currently assailing us, we know are just around the corner.

God wants us filled with Joy inexpressible and Peace surpassing comprehension in *every* circumstance at *all* times, whether life is good, bad, or somewhere in between. Joy and Peace are qualities of life that should go with us wherever we travel, inseparably. They shift and morph with one stepping to the side and another coming to the front as different forces press on us, but they never exclude the other. You can't have Joy without Peace, or Peace without Joy. They are two inseparable sides of the coin of true, balanced happiness.

Habakkuk 3:17-19 “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength...” (NIV)

Philippians 4:11-13 “... I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am... I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” (NASB)

Joshua 1:9 “... Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.” (NIV)

There are other examples of duality, but you get the idea. As we grow into the men and women God wants us to be, we must learn to accurately perceive these things, and instead of being confused and discouraged by them, we should appreciate and embrace them. We should receive them as two sides of the mystery of life in a fallen world that, when brought together in balance, reveal the “narrow road” that leads to the “abundant life” offered to us by Christ.

Matthew 7:13,14 “... wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” (NIV)

John 10:10 “... I (*Jesus*) came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (NASB)

A life in balance is able to walk this narrow path without falling prey to the snares and footholds that litter our way. We have a healthy, non-exclusive focus on both sides of the often long and complicated equations of human existence. We can walk without stumbling, and when we’ve really got it together, as we travel down life’s road, we sing.

Proverbs 29:6 “An evil man is snared by his own sin, but a righteous one can sing and be glad.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Sing, in a community, and here’s why...

All this about duality and balance may seem somewhat theoretical or overly cerebral. If that’s not your thing, here’s a very easy and practical way to know if your life is in balance. It’s also a great way gauge where you are spiritually at any given moment. *Sing.*

Sing a song that reflects how you feel. Don’t think too much about it. Just do it. And both *what you sing* and *how you sing it* will reveal exactly who you are and what’s going on in that particular moment of your life.

Music is a mysterious and powerful force. Lyrics in music speak to us in a more direct way, while the melodies, harmonies, and rhythms in music speak to us in an

abstract way. And together, these things are able to express how we feel in a manner that reaches beyond just the words and notes.

The words set a framework for what the song is about, and the music tells us what the words really mean. The music allows us to read between the lines of the lyrics, recognize the sub-text, and appreciate the true message of the words. And weaving these things together is an art that comes from God.

Music speaks to both our minds and hearts, and it sometimes communicates with us more profoundly than any other form. It moves both thoughts and emotions. And when we participate in the creation of the music, we are able to express how we feel in a way that transcends just about any other type of communication.

And so it's not surprising God's Word is full of music. Over and over again, we see references to singing and songwriting. Of course Psalms is an entire book of the Bible filled with lyrics. The Song of Solomon is another book of the Bible that is (as the title suggests) a song. Many other passages of scripture are understood to be lyrics from songs or early hymns, such as:

- The Magnificat of Mary in Luke 1:46-55.
- The description of the supremacy of Christ in Colossians 1:15-20.
- The passage on eternal life in Ephesians 5:14.
- The description of the attitude of Christ in Philippians 2:6-11.
- The creedal hymn in 1 Timothy 3:16.
- The declaration of God's faithfulness in 2 Timothy 2:11-13.

Also, consider the following:

- After God parted the Red Sea for Moses and the Israelites, Moses and the people celebrated with a song.

Exodus 14:31 through 15:2 “When Israel saw the great power which the LORD had used against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in His servant Moses. Then Moses and the sons of Israel sang this song to the LORD, and said, ‘I will sing to the LORD, for He is highly exalted; The horse and its rider He has hurled into the sea. The LORD is my strength and song...’” (NASB)

- One of the last things God instructed Moses to do before he died was write a song for the people of Israel to learn to remind them of how they were to live in the Promised Land.

Deuteronomy 31:16-22 “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Behold, you are about to lie down with your fathers... Now therefore, write this song for yourselves, and teach it

to the sons of Israel; put it on their lips, so that this song may be a witness for Me against the sons of Israel. For when I bring them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I swore to their fathers, and they have eaten and are satisfied and become prosperous, then they will turn to other gods and serve them, and spurn Me and break My covenant. Then it shall come about, when many evils and troubles have come upon them, that this song will testify before them as a witness (for it shall not be forgotten from the lips of their descendants); for I know their intent which they are developing today, before I have brought them into the land which I swore.’ So Moses wrote this song the same day, and taught it to the sons of Israel.” (NASB)

- Nehemiah dedicated the newly rebuilt walls of Jerusalem with a song.

Nehemiah 12:27 “Now at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites from all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem so that they might celebrate the dedication with gladness, with hymns of thanksgiving and with songs to the accompaniment of cymbals, harps and lyres.” (NASB)

- Jesus ended the Last Supper by singing a hymn with His disciples. It’s the last thing He did with them as a group.

Mark 14:22-26 “While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take it; this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,’ he said to them. ‘Truly I tell you, I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.’ When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.” (NIV)

- Paul and Silas, after being attacked by the crowds in Philippi, severely flogged, and thrown into prison, sang hymns, and God performed a miracle.

Acts 16:22-26 “The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone’s chains came loose.” (NIV)

- Heaven is described as a place full of singing.

Revelation 5:8,9 “... the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb... And they sang a new song...” (NIV)

Revelation 14:1-3 “Then I looked, and behold, the Lamb was standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His name and the name of His Father written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder, and the voice which I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps. And they sang a new song before the throne...” (NASB)

Revelation 15:2,3 “And I saw something like a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and the number of his name, standing on the sea of glass, holding harps of God. And they sang the song of Moses, the bond-servant of God, and the song of the Lamb... (NASB)

- God’s Word commands us to teach and admonish one another through songs, so the message of Christ can “richly dwell among us.”

Colossians 3:16 “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.” (NIV)

From these verses we learn that God uses music to do a wide variety of very important things. Inspired spiritual music teaches, encourages, and admonishes us. It provides one of the most powerful mediums for us to celebrate, as individuals and as a community. When we sing with others, it strengthens the bonds of friendship. And singing in the face of adversity is one of the most potent expressions of faith there is.

Psalms 57:1-11 “Have mercy on me, my God, have mercy on me, for in you I take refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings... My heart, O God, is steadfast... I will sing and make music. Awake, my soul! Awake, harp and lyre! I will awaken the dawn. I will praise you, Lord, among the nations; I will sing of you among the peoples. For great is your love, reaching to the heavens; your faithfulness reaches to the skies. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth.” (NIV)

Psalms 30:1-12 “I will exalt you, LORD, for you lifted me out of the depths... I called to you for help, and you healed me... To you, LORD, I called; to the Lord I cried for mercy... You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. LORD my God, I will praise you forever.” (NIV)

Psalms 63:1-7 “You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water... Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands. I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you... Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings.” (NIV)

But then why when we sing at church does it all too often sound like most of us are muttering something inaudible under our breath? It's like those answers we mumble with one hand over our mouths when we are embarrassed or ashamed of what we are saying. We sing without enthusiasm or conviction, which, when we really think about it, is intensely revealing and profoundly disturbing.

If your kids came to you and said, "hey, we would like to sing a song about all you've done for us," and then stood there with their hands in their pockets, staring at their toes, singing your praises in the lowest audible pitch and volume humanly achievable with a complete disregard for anything resembling diction, how would you react? Would you feel honored and loved? No matter how well written the song is, if it's offered to you with a total lack of enthusiasm, would it lift you up or pull you down? Would you want them to keep singing, or would you rather they stop?

Now consider how God must feel when we sing to Him like that! He gave us life, along with every blessing we have, and despite our habitual sins He came to earth and died for us. He gives us His empowering Spirit and His flawless Word with every promise we could ever want right there in black and white. He graciously incorporates us into His amazing plan, and picks us up every time we fail Him with never ending faithfulness. And when we die He promises to save us eternally and reward our service to Him with blessings far too great for us to presently comprehend. Then we sing to Him with a lifeless sense of indifference and boredom, and occasional irritation for the inconvenience of being required to get up from our comfy seats during a service.

Why do we do that? Some might say it's because they are just not singers and God hasn't blessed them with this particular gift, so it's embarrassing and they get a pass. But if your favorite secular song comes on the radio or is played at a concert, do you sit quietly and observe, or do you sing along, just because it's fun and it feels good? If you are at a ballgame and the band strikes up your college fight song, do you mouth the words with a blank expression, or do you jump up and let it rip? Aren't there times when you join in a song because you just can't help it, and it doesn't really matter how well you sing?

Of course you do, and so do we all. And that's how our worship is supposed to be! If our relationship with God is real and alive, if we see Him moving in and around us, and if we are walking beside Him through both sunshine and rain, and serving Him effectively along the way, there is absolutely no power on earth that can keep us from singing loud and clear. It's natural, spontaneous, and irresistible.

Isaiah 52:2-12 "Shake off your dust... Free yourself from the chains on your neck... Burst into songs of joy together... for the LORD has comforted his people... the LORD will go before you, the God of Israel will be your rear guard." (NIV)

Isaiah 42:10,11 “Sing to the LORD a new song... Let the people... sing for joy; let them shout from the mountaintops.” (NIV)

Psalm 71:19-23 “Your righteousness, God, reaches to the heavens, you who have done great things. Who is like you, God?... I will praise you with the harp for your faithfulness, my God; I will sing praise to you with the lyre, Holy One of Israel. My lips will shout for joy when I sing praise to you – I whom you have delivered.” (NIV)

Psalm 98:1-9 “Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things... The LORD has made his salvation known... He has remembered his love and his faithfulness... Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; make music to the LORD with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing, with trumpets and the blast of the ram’s horn – shout for joy before the LORD, the King... for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.” (NIV)

Psalm 13:5,6 “But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the LORD’s praise, for he has been good to me.” (NIV)

What this all comes down to is whether we are genuinely motivated to sing. If we truly feel something, we will sing whether we are Pavarotti or Alfalfa, and nothing can stop us. Sadly, the reason many of us sing so dispassionately at church is not because we can’t sing, it’s because we don’t feel like singing.

This is where music is such a great gage of where we are spiritually. If we are walking in harmony with God, we will sing to Him. If we are just going through the motions, faking it, or in active rebellion, singing is a burden, not a joy.

If your singing to God at church or elsewhere lacks passion (or is nonexistent), then stop and take some time to reflect upon why this is. Are you angry at someone? Are you angry at God? Are you worried, heartbroken, or afraid? Or are you just apathetic and disinterested? Once you have your answer, then realize you are (whether you like it or not) communicating this straight to the ear of the Creator of the Universe, and ask yourself how your motivations and actions make Him feel.

If you will do this, you will be able to get right with God pretty quickly. Whatever is in your heart becomes easily understandable, and you will know how to correct it. If you are angry, you can forgive. If you are worried or afraid, you can trust. If you are heartbroken, you can forgive and trust. And if you are apathetic, you can consider all that God has done for you and start being grateful.

Then something incredibly powerful happens! Your heart is transported, from a place of ungratefulness, bitterness, and/or fear, to a place of gratitude, forgiveness, and faith. What was once empty and false is now meaningful and true.

And suddenly, you’ll find yourself *wanting* to sing and *not caring* how good you are. Before, there was no desire to sing because what you were feeling was not desirable.

Now what you are feeling is something precious and pure. It builds within you, and begs for expression. You will *need* to sing, as the only possible way to release what is inside you. And what will be important is not how good you sound, but how good it feels to release genuine praise to the God who died for you.

Psalm 28:1-7 “To you, LORD, I call; you are my Rock... Praise be to the LORD, for he has heard my cry for mercy. The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and he helps me. My heart leaps for joy, and with my song I praise him.” (NIV)

Psalm 9:1-10 “I will give thanks to you, LORD, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing the praises of your name, O Most High... For... The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. Those who know your name trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you.” (NIV)

Psalm 107:1-43 “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story... they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way... Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind, for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things... they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness, the utter darkness, and broke away their chains. Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds... tell of his works with songs of joy... Let the one who is wise heed these things and ponder the loving deeds of the LORD.” (NIV)

Now consider again how *this* must make God feel! Instead of a passionless, dispirited, and distracted child completely disconnected from his or her Heavenly Father, He sees a humble, grateful, faith-filled child expressing praise in one of the most beautiful ways He has given to us. There is a connection with God unique to music that can happen no other way.

One reason singing to God is so powerful is that to truly do it (not just go through the motions), we are forced to set aside all apathy, anger, bitterness, and debilitating fear. We can't bitterly sing genuine praises to God. Nor can our songs be filled with indifference, rage, or a hopeless surrender to worry. Our impediments to song are incredibly precise indicators of whatever is standing between us and God. But that's great, because it also reveals the path back to Him. And when we cast these things aside and lift our voices to Him through heart-felt praise and worship, the benefits are incalculable.

Psalm 73:1-28 “Surely God is good to... those who are pure in heart! But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling... For I was envious of the arrogant as I saw the prosperity of the wicked... They mock and wickedly speak of oppression... When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight until I came into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end. Surely You set

them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction... When my heart was embittered and I was pierced within, then I was senseless and ignorant. I was like a beast before You. Nevertheless I am continually with You; You have taken hold of my right hand. With Your counsel You will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. For, behold, those who are far from You will perish; You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to You. But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all Your works.” (NASB)

There is great music out there in every genre for which you could hope. Expose yourself to it. You can't sing if you don't know any songs! We have the wonderful, classic hymns of yesterday, and some fabulous praise music of today. There's pop, rock, country, and polka. There is high choral music both ancient and modern that will surround you like incense. And there are gospel choirs that will take you straight to heaven. Whatever your tastes, arm yourself with great music, and it will become a powerful weapon you can use to defend yourself against the attacks of this fallen world.

So try it!

- *Are you afraid?* Find a song of trust in God and sing it to Him.
- *Depressed?* Ditto.
- *Angry?* Let that anger go, forgive, and sing a song of faith in God that tells Him you choose to trust in Him no matter what.
- *Apathetic?* Try a song that recognizes all God has done for you expressing gratitude and awe.
- *Confused?* Sing a song that humbly asks God for wisdom. Do you think He will refuse to answer, if you wait patiently and expectantly for His voice? Of course not!
- *Heartbroken?* There's no better way to let it out and let God in than to sing to Him.
- *Tempted?* Singing is a great way to deal with temptation and break the addictions that so often plague us. It's difficult to indulge in sinful appetites when you are singing a song that glorifies the One with the power and desire to break every chain that binds us.

If you will do this (as one part of an overall healthy spiritual life filled with study of God's Word, prayer, service, and Christ-like love), it will utterly transform you in a way that nothing else can. There is mystery in the unique power of music that allows what is bottled up within us to come out, and that is a very cleansing thing. Because music possesses an abstract element, it lends expression to those things that are all too often unacknowledged and unexpressed but need to be released. It purges

repressed feelings and makes room for Joy inexpressible and Peace surpassing comprehension.

Psalm 92:1-4 “It is good to praise the LORD and make music to your name, O Most High, proclaiming your love in the morning and your faithfulness at night, to the music of the ten-stringed lyre and the melody of the harp. For you make me glad by your deeds, LORD; I sing for joy at what your hands have done.” (NIV)

This all relates to the power of praise, which we looked at earlier in this chapter. There is tremendous power in praising and worshiping our Creator! Praising God in the face of loneliness, suffering, or persecution is a pure expression of trust in God. Along with the love we show to others (especially the underserving), it’s one of the most tangible ways in which we can demonstrate our faith when we are tested by the sadness in this fallen world.

Psalm 59:16,17 “But I will sing of your strength, in the morning I will sing of your love; for you are my fortress, my refuge in times of trouble. You are my strength, I sing praise to you; you, God, are my fortress, my God on whom I can rely.” (NIV)

And what better vehicle is there to offer our praise than music? It takes tangible words and combines them with intangible melodies, and together these things are able to express faith through both the thoughts of the mind and the feelings of the heart. It engages both our will and our emotions, and allows them to simultaneously declare unequivocal trust in the Word of the living God.

And how that pleases our Lord! It’s all He’s really after. It’s is how we pass life’s tests, bring light to the world, and receive rewards from our loving Heavenly Father both in this life and especially in eternity. Out trust in God unlocks all these things, and allows Him to use us effectively as His instruments in a fallen world.

Psalm 69:1-34 “Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me. I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched... You, God, know my folly; my guilt is not hidden from you... But I pray to you, LORD... in your great love, O God, answer me with your sure salvation. Rescue me from the mire... Do not let the floodwaters engulf me or the depths swallow me up... Answer me, LORD, out of the goodness of your love; in your great mercy turn to me. Do not hide your face from your servant; answer me quickly, for I am in trouble... But as for me, afflicted and in pain... I will praise God’s name in song and glorify him with thanksgiving. This will please the LORD more than an ox, more than a bull with its horns and hooves (*i.e., Levitical sacrifices*)... you who seek God, may your hearts live! The LORD hears the needy and does not despise his captive people... Let heaven and earth praise him...” (NIV)

2 Timothy 2:21 “Those who cleanse themselves... will be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.” (NIV)

God wants us to trust Him no matter what the world throws at us, and demonstrate that trust by emulating the love of Jesus, for both our fellow mankind and our Heavenly Father. We express our love for others by being patient, kind, forgiving, and good, and as we have seen this is indeed also an expression of our love for God, because it is our love for Him that motivates our love for others. And while there are plenty of other ways to express our love for God, perhaps the most intimate and personal way is to sing to Him.

Singing to someone is a very intimate thing. Singers have to open up and expose their hearts. They must put themselves in a very vulnerable place, and risk rejection and humiliation. It's personal as well, because every voice is different, and reflects who only you are. And so singers have a strong desire for their individual voice and song to be accepted and appreciated.

Being sung to is also an intimate thing. It entrusts you with a power over the singer, to accept their song and make them feel great, or reject it and hurt them deeply. And in this exchange relationships are either strengthened or broken.

It takes guts to sing, and perhaps that is one reason we are sometimes reluctant to sing to God. We are afraid He may not like our voice and reject our song. So if the thought of singing to the Creator of the heavens and the earth is a little intimidating to you, try this: *Sing in a community.*

The Christian life is not meant to be lived alone. We are expressly called in God's Word to gather together with other followers of Jesus and teach, encourage, and support one another. It's hard to walk the “narrow path that leads to life” by ourselves. We need other people to journey with us, and share the burdens that weigh us down along the way.

Hebrews 10:24,25 “and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another...” (NASB)

1 Thessalonians 5:5-28 “You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled... Therefore encourage one another and build each other up... Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus... Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil...”

May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and He will do it... The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Titus 2:1-8 “... speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine. Older men are to be temperate, dignified, sensible, sound in faith, in love, in perseverance. Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be sensible, pure... kind... that the word of God will not be dishonored. Likewise urge the young men to be sensible; in all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, with purity in doctrine, dignified, sound in speech which is beyond reproach, so that the opponent will be put to shame, having nothing bad to say about us.” (NASB)

Hebrews 3:12,13 “See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” (NIV)

Colossians 3:12-17 “... put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.” (NASB)

We are not created to be isolationists, keeping to ourselves and never interacting with others. We can’t be a light in the world if we hide from those who inhabit it. God wants us rubbing shoulders with the lost, so they can discover their Heavenly Father through encounters with His children. And those encounters often go much better when we have a team to support us in our efforts.

Matthew 5:14-16 “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” (NASB)

When we sing in a group, what’s important is not the quality of the individual voices, but rather the quantity. It’s amazing how good a bunch of average voices can sound when joined together in a choir. There is a synergy between the voices, where each individual voice contributes something necessary and worthy to the collective music, and if there are any shortcomings in an individual voice, the voice beside it fills in the

gap with what is unique and special about it. The whole is truly greater than the sum of its parts. And because it sounds good, we sing louder.

It's the same way when we walk with Jesus in a community, like a great local church. We just sound better. We each use our unique gifts to contribute to God's plan, and where we have weaknesses, we also have friends to lift us up and keep us moving forward. And in turn we can lift others up with our gifts when they fall behind, and derive a sense of satisfaction and meaning that only comes from fulfilling our part in a successful team.

Galatians 6:2-10 “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ... Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” (NIV)

When we read the Bible carefully, there really aren't many soloists, but there are lots of choirs. The great men in the Bible had strong support teams behind them. On the good advice of his father-in-law, Moses shared the burden of leadership, because it was too much for him alone (Exodus 18). David had an amazing friend in Jonathan, and an extraordinary team of advisors and military leaders (1 Samuel 19; 1 Chronicles 11). The disciples traveled in groups or pairs, with the support of a local church (Acts 12 & 16). Even Jesus didn't enter into His ministry alone. He gathered about Him a team of disciples, and they went out together.

We can do so much more as a group than as individuals. And through the camaraderie of friendship, we are inspired to work harder and serve more than if we try to do it alone. We endure longer, with heightened focus, and more just plain fun, in a community. So go out and find one you like and join it. If you look hard enough, God will lead you to a church where you fit in, and where the goal is to learn and live by His Word.

And as you develop friendships and discover a place where you can serve with the unique gifts God has given you, you will find a home where you are no longer a stranger. We are strangers in this fallen world, but when we gather together with other followers of Jesus and unite in the purpose of knowing and serving Him, we find a place of refuge with brothers and sisters in Christ where we can be ourselves and fulfill our destiny as part of the “body of Christ.”

Ephesians 4:1-32 “... live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love... to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it... to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work... put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. 'In your anger do not sin': Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold... Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen... Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (NIV)

Romans 12:3-18 "For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly... if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." (NASB)

2 Timothy 1:6-9 "... fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you... God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord... by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life..." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Then we can truly sing, not as soloists, but as choir members. And our singing will be passionate, fun, and loud, both figuratively and literally. Our praises to God will be genuine, inspired, and amped up, because there are so many of us. When we sing together, we spur each other forward. We are better able to praise God in times of hardship and trial, because we are not alone. Instead, we are surrounded by people enduring similar trials with the same faith. We are better equipped to accomplish our

mission, because we are part of a diversified team with one unifying purpose. And singing soothes the pain of long, hard journeys. There is a reason soldiers sing while they march!

Ephesians 5:1-21 “Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved... among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people... For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord... Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity... be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (NIV)

Why should we sing? There are plenty of answers to that question. We’ll focus on two. First, we should sing to God *because He is so incredibly worthy of our worship and praise!* He overwhelmingly deserves it!

Psalms 96:1-13 “Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. Sing to the LORD, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day... For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise... the LORD made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary... ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name... Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness... Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it. Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy. Let all creation rejoice before the LORD...” (NIV)

Psalms 33:1-22 “Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him. Praise the LORD with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre. Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy. For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does. The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love. By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth... let all the people of the world revere him. For he spoke, and it came to be... the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations... the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love... We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. May your unfailing love be with us, LORD, even as we put our hope in you.” (NIV)

Psalms 68:4-35 “Sing to God, sing in praise of his name, extol him who rides on the clouds; rejoice before him – his name is the LORD. A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families, he leads out the prisoners with singing... Praise be to the Lord, to

God our Savior, who daily bears our burdens. Our God is a God who saves... Sing to God, you kingdoms of the earth, sing praise to the Lord, to him who rides across the highest heavens, the ancient heavens, who thunders with mighty voice. Proclaim the power of God, whose majesty is over Israel, whose power is in the heavens. You, God, are awesome in your sanctuary; the God of Israel gives power and strength to his people. Praise be to God!" (NIV)

Think of all God has done for us. He gives us life. (We could just stop there, but there's more!) He created this amazing planet for us to live on, in an unbelievably vast and beautiful universe. He loves us enough to become one of us and teach us His ways, even though He was despised, rejected, and finally crucified for His efforts. He pays for our sins and saves us from death. He unfailingly forgives and renews repentant hearts. He brings meaning and purpose to life, and grants Joy inexpressible and Peace surpassing comprehension. One day, He will make all things new and all things right. And to be a part of this, all we have to do is put our faith in Jesus and follow Him!

And as we follow the path Jesus lays out before us, another reason for singing comes sharply (and sometimes surprisingly) into focus, in a beautiful and glorious way. In our song, and in our praise, and in the faith these things are such an important part of, *we are able to perceive and experience the presence of the living God*, right there at our side. It turns out we were never walking alone. The God of the universe was there next to us all the time. And in our growing awareness of and increasing delight in His presence, we are able to finally know Joy and Peace in a fallen world.

In His presence, Joy and Peace – Something better, something more, and something only found there.

What is it we really want? For the moment, let's set aside Joy and Peace (or true happiness) as the *state of being* we ultimately desire. Instead, let's consider what *experience* we long for to make everything complete as we journey through life.

Our answers may be different depending upon where we are in life. We might say someone to love, children, health, purpose, fame, fortune, or other things like that. But if our hearts are humble, and if we truly search our deepest longings, isn't the answer: The presence of God?

Psalm 73:25-28 "... besides You, I desire nothing on earth... God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever... as for me, the nearness of God is my good..." (NASB)

When it's all said and done, *what you and I really want is to stand in the presence of God*. We want to see Him, and hear Him, and through His presence know with certainty that He is, He loves us, He has a plan for our lives, and His plan is good.

If our hearts are humble, God's presence would solve all of our problems. It would bring us the comfort we long for in every circumstance. No matter what was going on in our lives, we would know everything is going to be alright, because our Heavenly Father would be at our side. We would have the power to overcome our sinful natures, because God is right there. In the light of God's presence, the half-truths, lies, and deceits of this world would betray themselves. Our insecurities and fears would melt away in the majesty of the presence of the living God. We would have absolute confidence His will would be revealed, because we stand next to Him. And at His side, God's plan and our place within it would become perfectly clear. When it's all said and done, in our heart-of-hearts what we truly long for is: To be in God's presence.

Psalm 62:1 “My soul finds rest in God alone...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Now here is the amazing truth we all must come to understand: *We are in God's presence right now!*

God's presence is not something we are magically transported into. Nor does God swoop down and come into our presence after we discover some ancient secret or perform some mystical rite. God is omnipresent. He is already everywhere. There is nowhere He is not. And so no matter where we are, we are already in the presence of the almighty, eternal, holy, loving God.

Psalm 139:7,8 “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.” (NIV)

Acts 17:26-28 “From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ ” (NIV)

We are God's children. He loves us with a love more powerful that we can even begin to comprehend. He hasn't deposited us on this planet, gone on holiday, and promised to visit every now and then. He was present at the creation of mankind, and He never left. He always was, is, and will be here for each of His children, and that includes you and me. He is a present parent.

Psalm 103:8-18 “The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love... he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows

how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children – with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.” (NIV)

If you are reading this in your bedroom, you are in the presence of God. If you are in your study, at work, in the car, at the gym, on a hike – you are in the presence of God. If you are in a bar, at a crack house, in a hotel room with another person's spouse – you are in the presence of God.

Jeremiah 23:24 “ ‘Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?’ declares the LORD. ‘Do not I fill heaven and earth...?’ ” (NIV)

The problem is we don't always perceive His presence. We have this idea that to be in God's presence is to stand before His mighty throne, surrounded by multitudes of angels, with trumpets blaring and an indescribable light filling us with awe. And indeed, as we will see in the Coda to this work, in eternity we will experience the presence of God in a way very similar to that.

But in this life, the presence of God is something very different. It's much more personal, and much more intimate. It's not so much a special event in a throne room before multitudes. It's more like a long walk with a seasoned guide providing perfect instruction and constant encouragement – in a gentle whisper.

Isaiah 42:5,6 “This is what God the LORD says – the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: ‘I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you... a light...’ ” (NIV)

Micah 6:8 “... what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (NIV)

We saw early on in this study how God presents His grace in a gentle whisper. He doesn't scream. Nor does He mumble. He clearly presents us with truth, gently and quietly, and then allows us to choose to receive or reject it. And He requires us to make a conscious decision to silence the voices of both the fallen world and ourselves before we will be able to hear what He has to say.

1 Kings 19:11,12 “The LORD said *(to Elijah)*, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.’ Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake

came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.” (NIV)

Psalm 46:1-10 “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake... The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress... He says, ‘Be still, and know that I am God...’ ” (NIV)

Psalm 4:3,4 “... The LORD hears when I call to Him... and be still...” (NASB)

God’s presence in this fallen world is clear and unmistakable, but not overpowering or undeniable. It’s there if you humbly choose to recognize it. And if you pridefully choose to deny it, it becomes conveniently absent.

2 Timothy 4:3,4 “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.” (NASB)

Ephesians 4:18,19 “They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Hebrews 3:12,13 “See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” (NIV)

We have to *want* to experience the presence of God in order to perceive Him. It requires a humble heart and open mind. Pride and all the defiant things that grow from it (like fear, hate, bitterness, self-righteousness, etc.) prevent us from seeing God because we are too focused on ourselves to detect His presence.

Ezekiel 12:1,2 “The word of the LORD came to me (*Ezekiel*): ‘Son of man, you are living among a rebellious people. They have eyes to see but do not see and ears to hear but do not hear, for they are a rebellious people.’ ” (NIV)

Hebrews 12:1,14 “... let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And... be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.” (NIV)

Pride also has the devastating effect of preventing us from developing the senses required to perceive God’s presence. To detect the physical, we rely on eyes and ears. To detect the spiritual, we rely on something very different involving choice, because *we perceive the presence of God not by sight and sound, but through faith in truth.*

Psalm 31:14-20 “But I trust in you, LORD... my times are in your hands... How abundant are the good things that you have stored up for those who fear

you... on those who take refuge in you. In the shelter of your presence... you keep them safe..." (NIV)

As we have seen, God places the basic knowledge of His existence and love in every person's heart. From there, we are presented with a foundational choice, to either humbly seek Him or defiantly turn from Him. If we choose to seek Him, God honors this choice of faith by filling us with truth. He provides us with His Word and His Spirit, and when combined with faith (that is, choices to trust in His Word), He grants us wisdom. We become enlightened, filled with the light of God's truth.

Romans 1:18-32 "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man... Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions... receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness... and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them." (NASB)

2 Timothy 3:2-17 "... men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant... unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control... You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of... and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." (NASB)

Isaiah 11:2 "The Spirit of the LORD... the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might..." (NIV)

Psalms 51:6 "Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being, and in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom." (NASB)

Proverbs 2:3-11 "indeed, if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will... find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding... Then you will understand what

is right and just and fair – every good path. For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you.” (NIV)

2 Peter 1:19 “So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts.” (NASB)

Psalm 119:105 “Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path.” (NASB)

Psalm 36:9 “For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light.” (NASB)

Philippians 2:14-16 “Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life...” (NASB)

Ephesians 5:8-16 “... you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible... Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil...” (NIV 1984 ed.)

Ephesians 1:18,19 “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe...” (NASB)

In this light, we are able to perceive the presence of God. We see Him in the beauty of nature, the acts of service and sacrifice of faithful followers of Jesus, and the Joy and Peace that shines in the eyes of those who love Him. We hear His voice in the sounds of nature, the wise advice of mature believers, and especially in the pages of His precious Word. We feel His presence as we offer Him our prayers, praise, and service. We see His will revealed in our changing circumstances. And He is uniquely apparent in our times of silence, when we patiently and expectantly listen for His comfort and counsel.

Psalm 19:1-6 “The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their utterances to the end of the world. In them He has placed a tent for the sun... and there is nothing hidden from its heat.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 4:2-10 “... we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of

Christ... For God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh." (NASB)

2 Corinthians 3:3,18 "... you are a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts... And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord..." (NIV)

2 Corinthians 2:14,15 "... God... manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing;"

Psalm 62:1-8 "My soul waits in silence for God only; from Him is my salvation. He only is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold; I shall not be greatly shaken... My soul, wait in silence for God only, for my hope is from Him. He only is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold; I shall not be shaken. On God my salvation and my glory rest; the rock of my strength, my refuge is in God. Trust in Him at all times, O people... God is a refuge for us." (NASB)

Isaiah 30:15 "This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says: 'In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength...'" (NIV)

Psalm 46:1-10 "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake... The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress... He says, 'Be still, and know that I am God...'" (NIV)

As we grow in our faith, we become increasingly able to perceive the presence of God in every aspect of our lives. We see Him in our daily routine, our most difficult crises, and our most joyous occasions. Through our receptiveness to truth, our spiritual eyes and ears are opened.

John 8:31,32 "... Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'" (NIV)

When we are prideful, we become spiritually blind and deaf. Our defiance of God shuts down our spiritual senses, so we remain ignorant of all but the most basic truths of God's existence and love. Deep down inside we all know there is a God, and we know He loves us, but in our arrogance we deny Him, and concoct any number of self-serving atheistic or agnostic philosophies or false religions to suit our

fancies. Then over time, our minds become weak and our hearts become hardened, and it's no surprise we thrash about in the darkness of the fallen world unable to perceive the ever-present God who is right there at our side.

Matthew 13:10-16 “The disciples came to him (*Jesus*) and asked, ‘Why do you speak to the people in parables?’ He replied... ‘This is why I speak to them in parables: “Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.” In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.” For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them. But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.’ ” (NIV)

Psalms 115:2-7 “Why do the nations say, ‘Where is their God?’... their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell; they have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but cannot walk...” (NIV)

Proverbs 3:13-26 “Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed... My son, do not let wisdom and understanding out of your sight, preserve sound judgment and discretion; they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck. Then you will go on your way in safety, and your foot will not stumble. When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, for the LORD will be at your side and will keep your foot from being snared.” (NIV)

But faith in truth grants us the spiritual equivalent of eyes to see and ears to hear our Heavenly Father, who is the infinite and almighty Creator of the universe and everything in it. Note that the Bible describes how our physical eyes and ears could not cope with the actual image and voice of God. They would truly blind and deafen us. But our faith in His truth allow us to perceive His love, plan, and promises, and these are what are truly important about Him – not what He looks and sounds like, but what He acts like and how He promises to treat us.

1 Timothy 6:13-16 “... God... alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen.” (NASB)

Jeremiah 9:23,24 “Thus says the LORD, ‘Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and

**righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,' declares the LORD.”
(NASB)**

Now, if we are being honest, all this about spiritual senses growing through faith in truth sounds lovely, but when we get right down to it, we'd much rather be able to perceive God's presence with the plain ole eyes and ears God already gave us. If we could just bypass all this other stuff and actually see or hear Him, or an angel, or a miracle, that would make faith so much easier.

This is a very common and human way of thinking, but as we have seen, God's Word declares and demonstrates just the opposite. The Bible is full of people who saw and heard God and His angels and experienced miracles. Yet none of these things had any lasting impact.

Lucifer and the other fallen angels were created and lived in the very presence of God, yet they rebelled. Ezekiel 28:11-19; Isaiah 14:12-15. Adam and Eve walked in the Garden of Eden every day with God, but they still ate that fruit. Genesis 3. Abraham talked to God all the time, but he still committed adultery. Genesis 16. The people of Israel had miracles literally every day for 40 years while wandering in the wilderness. Seas parted, pillars of fire went before them, manna fed them, water gushed from rocks, and they are described as one of the most rebellious generations in history. Deuteronomy 1. Jesus healed ten lepers. Only one thanked Him. Luke 17:11-19. Many saw His miracles, and then defiantly walked away from Him. John 6. Jesus' parable about the rich man and Lazarus is particularly notable:

Luke 16:19-31 “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’ But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’ He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’ ‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’” (NIV)

We could go on and on. The scriptures are full of many other examples. The point is this: Supernatural things, whether appearances of God, angels, or miracles, have never made the difference. The only things that mattered were *truth* and *choice*. God presents us with truth, and we make a choice to follow Him or run from Him. What makes the difference is what's in our hearts, and that is up to us.

Matthew 16:1-4 “The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. He replied, “... a wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Psalms 78:32 “In spite of all this, they (*the Exodus generation, who witnessed miracles every day for 40 years*) kept on sinning; in spite of his wonders, they did not believe.” (NIV)

John 20:24-29 “Now Thomas... one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came (*after the resurrection*). So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord!’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.’ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.’ Thomas said to him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ Then Jesus told him, ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’” (NIV)

Proverbs 4:23 “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.” (NASB)

Galatians 5:6 “... The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” (NIV)

Jesus made it very clear that there is a great big problem with miracles – it makes us weak. We become miracle junkies. Our faith becomes dependent upon them, and just as an addict's life revolves around getting his or her fix, to the exclusion of all else, our lives revolve around seeking the miraculous, and we forget what is truly important – faith, hope, and love.

1 Corinthians 12:31 through 13:13 “... And now I (*Paul*) will show you the most excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing... where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears... And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

But when we learn to base our faith, not on miraculous signs, but on the promises in God's Word we are convicted by God's Spirit are true, then we become unbelievably strong. Our faith cannot be shaken, because it is not dependent upon the occurrence of a supernatural event. It's dependent upon the clear, unequivocal promises of the One we know to be faithful and true. And that's something no power on earth can take from us.

Isaiah 26:3,4 "The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect peace, because he trusts in You. Trust in the LORD forever, for in GOD the LORD, we have an everlasting Rock." (NASB)

Then, no matter what the world throws at us, our faith is unbreakable. If we are chucked into the fires of spiritual testing, our faith does not depend upon a supernatural fire hose to douse the flames. We trust God no matter what happens, whether the fires remain hot or give way to cool breezes. And this brings tremendous glory to God, light to the world, and Joy, Peace, and blessing to us, which could never occur if our faith was stubbornly withheld pending the arrival of a miracle.

Psalm 119:28 "My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word." (NIV)

Habakkuk 3:17-19 "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength..." (NIV)

1 Peter 4:11 "... If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen." (NIV)

Hebrews 13:20,21 "Now may the God of peace... equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen." (NIV)

To see and hear God, we have to actively develop our spiritual senses. How? First, *we must immerse ourselves in the truths contained in God's Word.* We have to discover what God is truly like, how He behaves, and what He promises, before we can reasonably expect to detect His presence.

2 Peter 1:2-4 "Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him... He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you might become partakers of the divine nature..." (NASB)

Romans 15:4 "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." (NASB)

Hebrews 4:12 “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (NASB)

2 Timothy 3:16,17 “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 4:6 “... learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant...” (NASB)

John 16:2,3 “... an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God. These things they will do because they have not known the Father or Me (*Jesus*).” (NASB)

Next, *we need to be obedient in our walk with God.* We must rely on the Spirit of God to help us live by the Word of God we have learned. We can't reasonably expect to experience God's presence when we are in active rebellion against Him.

Psalm 5:5 “The arrogant cannot stand in your presence...” (NIV)

Isaiah 57:17 “I (*God*) was enraged by their sinful greed; I punished them, and hid my face in anger, yet they kept on in their willful ways.” (NIV)

Ephesians 3:16 “... be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man,” (NASB)

Galatians 5:16-23 “... walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control...” (NASB)

1 John 3:19-24 “This is how... we set our hearts at rest in his presence...we have confidence before God... because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them...” (NIV)

Then *we need to prayerfully ask God to grant us sensitivity to His presence in our lives.* We must ask Him to grant us spiritual wisdom so that in the light of God's Word and through the power of His Spirit we can perceive God's movement and voice around us. We'll never be able to do it on our own. It's something God must grant to us through the power of His Spirit and Word.

Psalm 119:18-149 “Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things... Cause me to understand the way of your precepts, that I may meditate on your wonderful deeds... strengthen me according to your word... be gracious to me and teach me... Teach me knowledge and good judgment... Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path... Turn to me and have mercy on me, as you always do to those who love your name. Direct my footsteps according to your word; let no sin rule over me... Make your face shine on your servant and teach me... I call with all my heart; answer me, LORD... Hear my voice in accordance with your love...” (NIV)

And finally, *we must expect God to keep His Word.* We have to believe He is going to do what He has promised. We must have faith in His truth. If we don't believe God is going to keep His promises, how can we expect to benefit from them? We can't expect to know God's presence, when we talk about Him like He's not in the room. We have to believe He's right there next to us. When we sing, we have to sing right to Him.

James 1:2-8 “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.” (NIV)

Micah 7:7,8 “But as for me, I will watch expectantly for the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me. Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy. Though I fall I will rise; though I dwell in darkness, the LORD is a light for me.” (NASB)

Psalms 5:2-12 “Hear my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray... in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly... Lead me, LORD, in your righteousness... make your way straight before me... let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in you. Surely, LORD, you bless the righteous; you surround them with your favor as with a shield.” (NIV)

Isaiah 49:23 “... those who hope in me (*God*) will not be disappointed.” (NIV)

We know His Word. We walk His path. We ask of Him. We believe in Him. And through our faith, hope, and love God opens our eyes and ears, and His presence leaps out at us in everything. We see His hand moving in both the big and small things in our lives. We are able to see beyond the disheartening things of mankind that choke the life out of this world and into the inspiring things of God that still shine through if only we will choose to see them. And in our hearts we feel His voice and recognize His presence surrounding us, every minute of every day, in the best of times and the worst of times.

Psalms 89:15-17 “Blessed are those who have learned to... walk in the light of your presence, LORD. They rejoice in your name all day long; they celebrate your righteousness. For you are their glory and strength...” (NIV)

And what we wind up with is the most precious thing of all – a relationship with God that is real and alive. It's a day by day, moment by moment walk with our Creator, through good and bad, pleasure and pain, delight and heartbreak. Yet no matter what, we are able

to always serve Him, fulfill His purpose, and know Joy inexpressible and Peace surpassing comprehension.

Psalm 31:1-24 “In you, LORD, I have taken refuge... you are my rock and my fortress... Into your hands I commit my spirit... I will be glad and rejoice in your love... I trust in you, LORD; I say, ‘You are my God.’... Let your face shine on your servant... Praise be to the LORD, for he showed me the wonders of his love... Love the LORD, all his faithful people! The LORD preserves those who are true to him... Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the LORD.” (NIV)

Isaiah 42:5,6 “This is what God the LORD says – the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: ‘I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you... a light...’ ” (NIV)

Psalm 16:11 “You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.” (NIV)

And it's through this relationship with Him that God grants us Joy and Peace. We understand Him, which allows us to understand ourselves, others, and the world around us. We obey Him, by putting our faith in Jesus and then following Jesus. We do this in the light of God's Word and through the power of God's Spirit. Our hearts fill with faith. Our minds fill with hope. We love God and other people the way Jesus did. We become selfless, discerning servants of God. And as we serve Him, we see and hear Him. We live out our lives in this fallen world in His presence, and there we find the Joy and Peace for which we long.

Romans 15:13 “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (NIV)

And that's something more and something better than anything the world can offer! As we have seen, the best the world can offer is temporary distraction from unhappiness. It can ward off the misery and despair that inevitably result from a life lived in defiance of God, for a time. But that time never lasts. Eventually, the newness and excitement of the things of the world lose their luster and give way to the pounding theme God sets in every human heart: You cannot find happiness in this life in anything other than a loving relationship with the One who created you.

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 “I (Solomon, perhaps the most powerful and wealthy man to ever live) said to myself, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself.’ And behold, it too was futility... I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself; I made gardens and parks for myself, and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees... I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. Also, I collected for myself silver and gold, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself... the pleasures of men – many

concubines. Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem... And all that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure... I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.” (NASB)

1 Timothy 6:7-19 “For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it... Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs... pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith... Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.” (NIV)

The Joy and Peace a relationship with God offers is just the opposite of the temporary distractions offered by the world. Instead of being temporary, Joy and Peace are constant, unbreakable, and invulnerable (so long as we walk humbly with God). They are two invaluable things that nothing in this world can take from us, no matter how bad (or good) things get. The only way we can lose them is to toss them aside through defiance of God.

1 Peter 1:1-8 “... To God’s elect, strangers in the world... Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power... In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy,” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

2 Corinthians 4:17,18 “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (NASB)

Matthew 6:19-21 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and

where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (NIV)

Psalm 73:25-28 “... besides You, I desire nothing on earth... God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever... as for me, the nearness of God is my good...” (NASB)

The things of this world that distract us from unhappiness (like alcohol, drugs, promiscuity, fame, fortune, power, etc.) can be lost in an instant. They are extremely fragile. And their potency is limited. They only have their intended effect for a short time. Then they leave us increasingly desperate and alone.

Jeremiah 17:11 “Like a partridge that hatches eggs it did not lay are those who gain riches by unjust means. When their lives are half gone, their riches will desert them, and in the end they will prove to be fools.” (NIV)

Deuteronomy 28:62-67 “... because you did not obey the LORD your God... the LORD will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life. In the morning you will say, ‘If only it were evening!’ and in the evening, ‘If only it were morning!’ – because of the terror that will fill your hearts...” (NIV)

Isaiah 57:20,21 “But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. ‘There is no peace,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked.’” (NIV)

Romans 2:9-11 “There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil... but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good... For there is no partiality with God.” (NASB)

The distractions of this world are just that, distractions. They allow us to sidestep unhappiness for a time, but they do not impart anything lasting or real. These tangible things of the world create an illusory state within us – a false and fragile “pseudo-happiness” – while the intangible things of Joy and Peace create something permanent and real within us: True happiness.

Job 20:4-8 “Surely you know how it has been from of old, ever since mankind was placed on the earth, that the mirth of the wicked is brief, the joy of the godless lasts but a moment. Though the pride of the godless person reaches to the heavens and his head touches the clouds, he will perish forever, like his own dung; those who have seen him will say, ‘Where is he?’ Like a dream he flies away, no more to be found, banished like a vision of the night.” (NIV)

Revelation 3:17 “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.” (NIV)

Ecclesiastes 6:2 “God gives some people wealth, possessions and honor, so that they lack nothing their hearts desire, but God does not grant them the ability to enjoy them...” (NIV)

Ecclesiastes 5:19 “Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil – this is a gift of God... because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart.” (NIV)

Psalms 128:1,2 “How blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in His ways. When you shall eat of the fruit of your hands, you will be happy and it will be well with you.” (NASB)

Joy and Peace grow right alongside our relationship with God, and they have no limit. That’s why they are described as “inexpressible” and “surpassing comprehension.” They are not limited by the boundaries of this world, because they come from the spiritual, not the physical.

And they carry on with us into eternity. The distractions of this world are truly mortal. Absolutely nothing in this world survives the grave, no matter how hard we cling to them. Joy and Peace *transcend* the grave. They are born out of our relationship with God – a relationship that survives death. And so they journey with us as we leave this life behind and enter into eternity, where they only increase, as we are set free of the bonds of mortality.

Proverbs 11:7 “When a wicked man dies, his hope perishes; all he expected from his power comes to nothing.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Matthew 6:19-21 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (NIV)

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1 Peter 1:1-17 “... To God’s elect, strangers in the world... Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power... In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all

kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy... Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

2 Corinthians 4:17,18 “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (NASB)

The world will take away the sadness for a little while, then leave you with nothing. God will grant you Joy and Peace forever, then give you everything. How much more and how much better is that?

Proverbs 3:5-18 “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight... Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed.” (NIV)

Joy and Peace are now, in this moment. As we have seen, true happiness is not a point to which we travel. It is a state of being that travels with us wherever we go. It is with us anywhere God leads, because its source is our relationship with the one who leads us, not the destination to which we are led.

And so it's something we can have right now, in this instant, if we will truly put our faith in our Heavenly Father. It's also something we can lose right now, in this instant, if we defy or doubt Him. But it's not something we can only obtain after years of faithful service. While it may grow and become more poignant and stable over the years, the moment we place our hope and trust in the Lord is the moment He grants us the Joy and Peace that only come from knowing Him.

Psalms 73:21-26 “When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” (NIV)

Philippians 4:6,7 “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And

the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (NASB)

And Joy and Peace are found nowhere else. As a simple, practical matter, there is no other place to turn. All the other paths championed by the world are dead ends, figuratively and literally. They prop up anxious minds for a time, but ultimately snap and leave us on our knees, having spent the energies of our lives on things with absolutely no eternal significance. Then one day we die and enter eternity empty handed – the great gift of life needlessly squandered. What can be more tragic than that?

John 6:66-69 “From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. ‘You do not want to leave too, do you?’ Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.’ ” (NIV)

Proverbs 16:25 “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.” (NASB)

Hebrews 12:12-17 “Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. Pursue peace with all men... See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.” (NASB)

But building up our relationship with God and coming to know His presence through faith in truth has a wondrous and marvelous effect...

Prepared for eternity.

In this life, we ultimately desire two things, and two things only: Joy and Peace. We want lives full of passion and contentment. All other pursuits are simply a means to these ends.

Depending on the choices we freely chose to make, we may follow any number of paths to reach these goals. All paths but one lead to misery and despair. All the other seemingly diverse paths take off in different directions, but lead only to one destination – a life that is ultimately without joy, without peace, and without eternal significance.

Matthew 7:13,14 "... wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." (NIV)

John 14:6 "Jesus said... 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me.'" (NASB)

There is only one path that leads to a life that is truly passionate and truly fulfilled. This is the path God takes us by the hand and guides us down. But it's not the path or its destination that brings us Joy and Peace. It's our relationship with the One who holds our hand.

Psalms 37:3-34 "Trust in the LORD and do good... delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart... trust in him and he... will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn... The LORD makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him; though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand... Hope in the LORD and keep his way. He will exalt you..." (NIV)

Isaiah 42:5,6 "This is what God the LORD says – the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: 'I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you... a light...'" (NIV)

Psalms 73:23-28 "Nevertheless I am continually with You; You have taken hold of my right hand. With Your counsel You will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever... as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all Your works" (NASB)

This relationship is not built upon the lightning and fire of supernatural proofs. It's built upon the intimate exchange of truth and faith. God calls out to each of us. We feel His voice, assuring us of His existence and love. From there we either humbly open our hearts and minds to Him, or defiantly close them.

John 10:2-28 "... the shepherd of his sheep... goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice... I (*Jesus*) have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand." (NIV)

Hebrews 4:7 "... just as has been said before, 'TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS.'" (NASB)

1 Peter 1:8 "and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory," (NASB)

If our desire is for the light of God, rather than the darkness of the world, then God nourishes us with truth, and the choices we make to trust and follow Jesus fill our hearts with faith, and our minds with hope, and our actions with love. Through faith, hope, and love, we cast out defiance, fear, and hate, and become selfless, discerning servants of God. We take our stand and speak the truth in love, and as we do, our lives become a music composed by God and played out in the world, through our every thought, word, and deed. We are instruments in the hands of the living God that accomplish works of divine good prepared in eternity past for us to do. We discover and fulfill our destiny, and receive from God what we desire most: Joy and Peace.

John 8:12 “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.’ ” (NIV)

John 3:17-21 “For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him... This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.” (NASB)

Ephesians 2:10 “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

1 Thessalonians 5:5-28 “You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled... since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that... we may live together with Him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up... Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus... Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil... May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and He will do it... The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

This Joy and Peace travel with us through life, whether the paths we walk are dark and lonely or exciting and fun. Our Joy is “inexpressible” and our Peace “surpasses comprehension” because they exist where the world tells us they shouldn’t – not in the self-serving lives of the world’s elite, but in the sacrificial lives of God’s servants. God leads. We follow. And at His side we live with passion and contentment.

Isaiah 48:17 “This is what the LORD says – your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: ‘I am the LORD your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go.’” (NIV)

1 Peter 1:1-17 “... To God’s elect, strangers in the world... Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power... In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy... Since you call on a Father who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Philippians 4:6,7 “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (NASB)

Psalms 89:15-17 “Blessed are those who have learned to... walk in the light of your presence, LORD. They rejoice in your name all day long; they celebrate your righteousness. For you are their glory and strength...” (NIV)

Proverbs 3:13-26 “Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed... My son, do not let wisdom and understanding out of your sight, preserve sound judgment and discretion; they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck. Then you will go on your way in safety, and your foot will not stumble. When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, for the LORD will be at your side and will keep your foot from being snared.” (NIV)

Psalms 119:165 “Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.” (NIV)

In this walk, our relationship deepens. We understand Him more. We develop a history where He faithfully demonstrates His goodness and mercy over and over again. Our spiritual eyes and ears become attuned to His presence. Though we do not literally see Him, we know Him intimately. We love Him passionately. We are His children, and He is our God.

Psalm 30:1-12 “I will exalt you, LORD, for you lifted me out of the depths... I called to you for help, and you healed me... To you, LORD, I called; to the Lord I cried for mercy... You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. LORD my God, I will praise you forever.” (NIV)

Isaiah 58:2-11 “... seek Me day by day, and delight to know My ways... delight in the nearness of God... Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth; and your righteousness will go before you; the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer... And the LORD will continually guide you, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, and give strength to your bones; and you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.” (NASB)

Psalm 59:16,17 “But I will sing of your strength, in the morning I will sing of your love; for you are my fortress, my refuge in times of trouble. You are my strength, I sing praise to you; you, God, are my fortress, my God on whom I can rely.” (NIV)

And because of this, we are ready for eternity. When we die, we are prepared to meet Him face to face. There is no fear of death, because we already know so well the One we are going to meet. He is not a stranger. He is not an unknown, unpredictable force. He’s our Dad. Our Creator, Redeemer, and Friend. For us, heaven is not going to a place. It’s going to a Person.

Isaiah 43:1-5 “But now, this is what the LORD says – he who created you... he who formed you... ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior... Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you... Do not be afraid, for I am with you...’ ” (NIV)

Romans 8:1-39 “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ... if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you... those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “*Abba, Father.*” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us... What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave

him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 15:52-58 “... the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed... For this perishable must put on the imperishable, this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, ‘DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP IN VICTORY. O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?’... thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.” (NASB)

He’s the one who gave us our physical life, saved us from our sins, and walked with us through every triumph and defeat. And when we step through the doors of death, He’s the One who takes us by the hand and grants us eternal life, and all the wonders that go along with it. We finally see His face, but it’s not an uncertain, nerve wracking, first encounter with the presence of God. It’s a thrilling, long awaited, final step in a life long journey carried out in God’s presence.

1 John 4:16,17 “... God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus.” (NIV)

Jude 1:24,25 “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.” (NASB)

It takes a lifetime to even begin to comprehend just how marvelous this is! We are blessed with life and purpose and an inheritance as a child of God that cannot be lost, only unclaimed. In this life, our inheritance is Joy and Peace in a fallen world. We are also rewarded, but only in part because of the limitations inherent in a world where freewill permits evil and our bodies are mortal. In eternity, our inheritance is Joy and Peace in a perfect world, and here we are rewarded in full, where all things are made new, and all things are made right, and possibilities are literally endless.

1 Peter 1:1-8 “... To God’s elect, strangers in the world... Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power... In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all

kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy,” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Hebrews 11:13-16 “All these people (*Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Jacob*) were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them... These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

2 Corinthians 4:17,18 “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 2:9 “but just as it is written, ‘THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.’ ” (NASB)

Our holy God has truly loved us with an everlasting love! He has done absolutely everything He possibly can to reach out to us and provide a life full of passion and contentment, and an eternity of blessing that is far beyond our present ability to comprehend. The only thing He has not done is make our choices for us. May each of us choose to humbly trust and follow Jesus, and through our faith, hope, and love come to know Joy and Peace in a fallen world!

Jeremiah 31:3 “... I (*God*) have loved you with an everlasting love...” (NIV)

Deuteronomy 30:19 “... I (*God*) have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live...” (NASB)

Joshua 24:15 “... choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...” (NIV)

Ephesians 3:20,21 “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.” (NIV)

Romans 15:13 “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him...” (NIV)

Coda

JOY AND PEACE IN A PERFECT WORLD

(ETERNITY: WHERE GOD MAKES ALL THINGS NEW AND ALL THINGS RIGHT)

STRANGERS NO MORE.

What awaits – A home for God's family.

In this work we have focused on this life, and how (through God's grace) we can know Joy and Peace in a fallen world. That's our great challenge, and that's God's great promise. We've not looked in any detail at eternity or the eternal rewards that God promises to those who choose to put their faith in Jesus and follow Him.

Eternal rewards should not be the motivation for our walk with God. We don't want to follow Jesus because of the promise of an eternal payday. We follow Him because we genuinely love Him and want to serve Him.

But at the same time, God wants us to know what awaits us when we die. He wants to comfort our natural fears of death, and He wants to instill confidence in His children that their Heavenly Father is going to be fair and indeed generous with them when He finally brings them home.

And so now we are going to have some fun! We are going to take a quick look at Joy and Peace in a perfect world; that is, in eternity, when we are no longer strangers living out finite lives in a world full of both good and evil. We are family members living out eternal lives in a world full of only Joy, Peace, and blessing!

Ephesians 2:19 “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are... of God's household,” (NASB)

APPROACHING HEAVEN.

Two amazing promises.

This is a very broad topic that could easily be a volume in itself. In fact, there are many fine books devoted to just this one subject. There are also many different and equally legitimate interpretations of exactly what eternity will be like.

The purpose of this brief Coda is not to get into the details of exactly how eternal rewards will be bestowed, or exactly when the eternal state will begin. Instead, our approach to this subject will be to look at two broad and far reaching promises that most everyone will agree are clearly declared in God's Word, and they are more marvelous that we can even begin to comprehend! In eternity, God will make:

1. All things new; and
2. All things right.

Revelation 21:5 "He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!...' " (NIV)

Revelation 7:17 "for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes." (NASB)

GOD WILL MAKE ALL THINGS NEW.

A broad overview of dispensations.

To understand eternity, we need to begin with an extremely broad overview of human history. This has to do with what is sometimes called "dispensations." Dispensations is a way of breaking up human history according to the differences in the way God has and will communicate to mankind, along with other factors.

There are a few different ways to do this, and the purpose of this section is not pick one method over another. There are several good ways to structure dispensations. We will just break things down very simply in order to set the stage for a look into eternity.

Human history began with what can be called the dispensation of the *Gentiles*. This would be from Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, until the time of Abraham circa 2000 B.C. Why is it called the dispensation of the Gentiles? Because this is before the Jewish race was established. What distinguishes this dispensation, among other characteristics, is that it was a time before there was any written Word of God. In fact, most people were illiterate. God communicated to people directly through angels, dreams, visions, miracles, and by speaking audibly to people.

From Abraham to Christ can be thought of as the dispensations of the *Jews*. This is the age of Abraham, Moses, David, and finally, Jesus Himself. During this dispensation there were the miraculous means of communication described in the Gentile dispensation, and also an incomplete canon of Scripture in the form of the books of the Bible we now know as the Old Testament.

From Jesus to the present can be thought of as the dispensation of the *Church*. Here we have the completed canon of the Scripture, with all of the books from both the Old and New Testament, as a primary means through which God communicates His truth.

The return of Jesus.

That is an extremely broad way of looking at human history to date. There are several other ways to do it in more detail that are excellent, but again, we are just trying to get an overview here, and we are not attempting to dive into the nuances of dispensational theology. We can just think of human history as Creation to Abraham, Abraham to Jesus, and Jesus until now.

There is a fair amount of disagreement about exactly what happens next. In studying Revelation, Jesus' words in the Gospels, and the prophetic books such as Daniel, there appears to be a seven-year period of intense worldwide turmoil sometimes called the "Tribulation." Some also believe there is a "Rapture" of the Church age believers whereby they are taken up into heaven and do not experience the Tribulation. Some believe the Rapture takes place at the beginning of the Tribulation. Some believe it takes place in the middle. Some at the end. And some not at all.

Matthew 24:3-27 "... 'what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?' And Jesus answered and said... 'there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will. Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved... Behold, I have told you in advance... For just as the lightning comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be.' " (NASB)

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep (*an idiom for death*), so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of *the* archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words." (NASB)

The purpose of this study is not to get into any of that. It's a fascinating subject, and there are plenty of good resources out there for you to explore. What most people agree upon, and what is important for our study, is that at some point following these things Jesus returns.

When Jesus first came to earth, He came on a very specific mission: To show us how to love and to die for our sins. In this context, He is sometimes referred to as the “Lamb of God.” This is an image drawn from the Levitical sacrifices, where a spotless lamb was symbolically sacrificed on an altar, representing the atonement of our sins.

John 1:29-34 “The next day he (*John the Baptist*) saw Jesus coming to him and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!... I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God.’” (NASB)

1 Peter 1:18,19 “... you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold... but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.” (NASB)

God’s Word is also very clear that, at some point after Jesus’ resurrection, He will return to earth. This time His mission will be very different. He will come to set up a 1000-year reign of freedom and peace, sometimes called the “Millennium.”

Revelation 20:6 “...Christ... will reign... for a thousand years.” (NIV)

Here, Jesus is not referred to as the Lamb of God, but rather the “Lion of Judah.” Judah is the eldest tribe of Israel, from which Jesus is descended. The image of the lion represents the power and authority Jesus will exercise during the Millennium.

Revelation 5:4 “... Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed...” (NIV)

In His first “advent,” or appearance on earth, Jesus came like a sacrificial lamb to bring about our eternal, spiritual salvation. In His second advent, He comes like a lion and brings about a temporal, earthly salvation, where He personally brings peace and freedom to all the earth.

What is truly fascinating is that at the end of the Millennium, there is a revolt against Jesus’ reign by a portion of the men and women on earth. How this comes about and the motivations for this revolt are beyond the scope of this study, but suffice it to say, human nature doesn’t change. At any point in human history – whether it is Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the generations of Noah, Moses, or Jesus, the present, or even the Millennial reign of Christ Himself – some people choose to put their faith in God and some people choose to defy Him. Freewill remains free, and that means there will be good and evil. See Revelation 20.

Now here’s what’s important for our study. At the end of this revolution there is a final, conclusive victory over evil by Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Human history comes to an end and eternity begins.

Revelation 19:11-16 “And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. His eyes are a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems; and He has a name written on Him which no one knows except Himself. He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses. From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, ‘KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.’ ” (NASB)

A new heaven and a new earth.

So how does human history end and eternity begin? Again, the purpose of this study is not to try to establish any definitive timeline as to exactly what happens when. We are just looking in broad terms at what we know is promised. And one of the major events that occur at this point is the total, absolute destruction of the universe as we know it.

2 Peter 3:7-12 “... the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction... the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness... the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat!” (NASB)

That can be a somewhat frightening thought, but the exceptionally good news is that the present universe is destroyed in order to make way for a new universe, unstained by sin and evil and specifically designed by the God of all creation for our delight.

Revelation 21:1-4 “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away... And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.’ ” (NASB)

2 Peter 3:13,14 “But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless,” (NASB)

A new body.

Obviously the greatness and glory of this new universe could not be enjoyed in our present, mortal bodies, or anything like it, and so at some point we also receive what is sometimes referred to as a “resurrection” body; that is, a body that is similar to the body of the resurrected Christ. Exactly when we receive it is much debated, but not in this work. We can just be comforted in the promise that one day we will receive a body that no longer gets injured or sick, no longer ages, and no longer dies. We will have a body that can receive the blessings of God and stand joyfully in His glorious physical presence for all eternity.

Philippians 3:8-21 “... I (*Paul*) count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord... For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 15:50-58 “... flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable... the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality... then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’ ... thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” (NIV)

God promises us a new and perfect universe and a new and perfect body with which to enjoy it forever. But His blessings do not end there. Each of us lived out unique lives in a fallen world. We knew times of blessing and times of hardship. To varying degrees we experienced fairness but also injustice. Some dreams were realized, and some never came true. Sacrifices were made, and perhaps not completely rewarded. Good that we did may never have been recognized, while utter buffoons may have (seemingly) enjoyed lives of great ease and luxury. In a fallen world, life is not what we might consider “fair.”

In eternity, all of this changes forever. There is no hardship and no injustice. *Everything* is laid bare. *All* thoughts, words, and deeds are examined personally by God Himself. *Every* motivation and effort is carefully and flawlessly considered, and divine attention is paid to *each and every* act of faith, no matter how large or small. And then, our holy, loving God rises up as only He can and makes all things absolutely and eternally right.

Matthew 19:28-30 “Jesus said to them, ‘I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne... everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for

my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.' ” (NIV)

GOD WILL MAKE ALL THINGS RIGHT.

A perfect Witness to your life.

So often we think no one sees, no one hears, and no one understands. We think there is no one who truly knows what we are going through, or what it's like to be us. But the truth is: There is someone who knows all of this and much, much more in infinite detail – God.

Psalm 139:1-24 “O LORD, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You understand my thought from afar. You scrutinize my path and my lying down, and are intimately acquainted with all my ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O LORD, You know it all... For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother's womb... Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.” (NASB)

Psalm 44:21 “... God... knows the secrets of the heart.” (NASB)

As we have seen, whether we realize it or not, we live out our lives in the presence of God. God is omnipresent. He exists everywhere. There is no place He is not. And He also cares, more deeply than we can even begin to comprehend. He is right beside us, from birth until our dying breath (and beyond). Whether we are sensitive to His presence is another matter, but the point is this: There is a Witness to your life, who was by your side every single moment without exception. He saw everything you ever said or did. He was also able to comprehend every thought that ever entered your mind, and moreover, perfectly divine your every motivation. He knows you infinitely better than you know yourself.

Psalm 139:7,8 “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.” (NIV)

Psalm 139:1-24 “O LORD, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You understand my thought from afar. You scrutinize my path and my lying down, and are intimately acquainted with all my ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O LORD, You know it all... For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother's womb... Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.” (NASB)

Acts 17:26-28 “From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ ” (NIV)

Hebrews 4:13 “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” (NIV)

And we could also say He knows the “score.” He knows every injustice we suffered, and every injustice we caused. He knows every hardship we endured, and every hardship we created. He knows everything we did for both good and evil, and this has profound consequences in eternity.

Jeremiah 23:24 “ ‘Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?’ declares the LORD. ‘Do not I fill heaven and earth...?’ ” (NIV)

Ecclesiastes 12:13,14 “The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.” (NASB)

A perfect Judge of your life.

God is not only the perfect Witness to our lives. He is also the perfect Judge of our lives. Because He was there to personally witness every thought, word, and deed, He is uniquely qualified to fairly judge whether we brought good or evil into the world, and why.

At first this may seem somewhat intimidating. We know God is holy, and we are not. We know we have sinned throughout our lives, and fallen short of the glory of God. Our first impulse may be to worry how the scales will tip between good and evil, because that is how we as humans tend to judge one another, and we also tend to do so haphazardly and preferentially.

But having God as both Witness and Judge is actually overwhelmingly good news! God is absolutely and infinitely righteous, fair, and loving. He is neither inconsistent nor biased in either His observations as Witness or pronouncements as Judge. He is honest, faithful, and true every time.

Jeremiah 9:23,24 “Thus says the LORD, ‘Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and

righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,' declares the LORD." (NASB)

Deuteronomy 32:3,4 "I will proclaim the name of the LORD... He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he." (NIV)

Psalm 98:1-9 "Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things... for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity." (NIV)

1 Peter 2:21-23 "... Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly." (NIV)

And this judgment is not about salvation. God is not balancing out the good and evil in our lives to see if we made the cut to get into heaven. That demarcation depends on one thing and one thing only: Did we choose to receive Jesus as our Savior? There is no balancing out our good to see if it measures up to the prize of heaven. No one is that good, except Jesus Himself.

Ephesians 2:8,9 "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." (NASB)

Titus 3:5-7 "he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy... so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life." (NIV)

Colossians 1:19-20 "For God was pleased... through him (*Jesus*) to reconcile to himself all things... by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." (NIV)

This judgment is about rewards... and rewards only. And that means it's not about punishment. It's not about God going through your life and beating you up for all the stupid and horrible things you did. It's about your loving Heavenly Father sitting down with you and carefully going through your life in order to sift out the good you did, evaluate it for its worth, and joyfully reward you disproportionately in your favor (more on this later).

Revelation 22:12 "Look, I (*Jesus*) am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done." (NIV)

Revelation 11:17,18 "... We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because... The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your people who revere your name, both great and small..." (NIV)

Matthew 19:28-30 "Jesus said to them, 'I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne... everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.

**But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.’ ”
(NIV)**

The bonfire (searching for genuine faith).

As we begin eternity, there will come a moment when you will meet individually with God, and everything He witnessed in your life will be laid out before the two of you. God will analyze everything you thought, said, and did, in the context of everything you experienced. He will take into consideration the environment in which you were raised, the historical time in which you lived, every advantage you enjoyed, and every disadvantage you endured. It will be a detailed airing of the entirety of your life in perfect context with perfect objectivity.

Romans 14:10-12 “... For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God... then each one of us will give account of himself to God.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 5:10 “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.” (NASB)

With everything about your life finally out in the open, God then goes on a search for the thing He values most – genuine faith. God’s Word describes this metaphorically as God stacking up everything you thought, said, and did into a great big pile. Then God puts a match to it. And everything that was without eternal significance is burned away and turned to ash (like wood, hay, and straw caught in a blaze), while everything that truly mattered remains and becomes the basis of your eternal rewards (pictured as silver, gold, and precious stones).

1 Peter 1:1-17 “... To God’s elect, strangers in the world... Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power... In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy... Since you call on a Father who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

1 Corinthians 3:10-15 “... each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person’s work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it

is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved – even though only as one escaping through the flames.” (NIV)

The difference (motivations and efforts).

So what makes the difference? What makes one thing of lasting eternal value and another thing meaningless? How does God decide what is a genuine act of faith?

As we saw earlier in this study, God is intensely interested in our *motivations* and *efforts*. These are two things God looks at very closely, because they are the two things that are solely within our control. They are the best reflections of what is in our heart. They demonstrate who we truly are and how much we truly want to be of service to God. They are the indicators of genuine faith.

Proverbs 27:19 “As in water face reflects face, so the heart of man reflects man.” (NASB)

1 Peter 3:4 “... the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit... is precious in the sight of God.” (NASB)

Proverbs 16:2 “All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, but the LORD weighs the motives.” (NASB)

Hebrews 12:14 “Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy...” (NIV)

What God doesn't consider at all in this context is the *results* of our motivations and efforts, because that is totally up to Him. How God chooses to use purely motivated hard work in His plan depends entirely upon His purpose, which as we have seen can sometimes be very difficult to discern. Remember Noah's motivations were pure and his efforts were herculean, yet he convinced no one to follow God other than his immediate family (although he certainly accomplished God's purpose). See Genesis 6 & 7. Jonah had terrible motivations and did next to nothing, and led an entire city to repent (which also accomplished God's purpose but left Jonah suicidal). See Jonah 3 & 4.

Galatians 5:6 “... The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” (NIV)

This is another great example of how God's ways are exactly the opposite of our ways. We focus so intently on results. We judge our accomplishments through the weights and measures of head counts and dollar signs, when God is not focused on any of that! God wants us working hard to do what's right for the right reason; that is, because we love Him and love others. He then wants us to trust Him with the results and be confident that no matter what becomes of our efforts, He will reward the hard work we do because we love our Maker and those He has made.

Revelation 3:17 “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’
But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.”
(NIV)

Luke 16:15 “He (*Jesus*) said to them (*the Pharisees*), ‘You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God’s sight.’” (NIV)

1 Samuel 16:7 “... for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 3:19 “For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight...”
(NIV)

Isaiah 49:23 “... those who hope in me (*God*) will not be disappointed.” (NIV)

It’s also really important to get something else into our heads. Even though something we do apparently has great results, we cannot assume God is going to reward us for it. God is going to look first and foremost at our motivations, and reward us accordingly. For example, there are (and always have been) plenty of preachers out there saying perfectly true things about God in order to get rich, and they legitimately communicate truth that others benefit from, but they have no reward with God, who sees what they really want is fame and fortune, not to serve God and other people.

Romans 12:9 “Love must be sincere...” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 13:3 “And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor... but do not have love, it profits me nothing.” (NASB)

Matthew 6:1-6 “Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.” (NASB)

Matthew 25:31-40 “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the

righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’” (NIV)

Matthew 7:21-23 “Not everyone who says to me (*Jesus*), ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” (NIV)

Philippians 1:15-18 “It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so out of love... The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition... But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I (*Paul*) rejoice...” (NIV)

Isaiah 55:10,11 “As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” (NIV)

1 Timothy 1:5 “But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” (NASB)

Galatians 4:18 “It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good...” (NIV)

Joel 2:13 “Rend your heart and not your garments...” (NIV)

We must carefully consider our every thought, word, and deed and ask ourselves: Why did I do that, and at what cost? What was my motivation, and did I try as hard as I could? In eternity, God is going to pose these questions, and our truthful replies will make all the difference in the (new!) world.

1 Chronicles 28:9 “... serve Him with a whole heart and a willing mind; for the LORD searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will reject you...” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 4:5 “... the Lord... will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts; and then each man’s praise will come to him from God.” (NASB)

The answers (drying our tears).

We stand before God. He brings forth everything He has witnessed in our lives and piles it in a heap. Then He fairly judges us, as with a flame, and all that was done for selfish reasons is burned away.

We are not disciplined for the wrong we did, in the sense of an eternal punishment that torments us forever. That's not God's purpose in this judgment. This is in a sense, an "affirmative" judgment, where God's intent is not to correct His child, but rather to reveal to His child the true accomplishments of his or her life, sifting through every thread with the intention of discovering what can be rewarded, not what can be punished.

Our only punishment (although it is a considerable one) will be to see so much of what we did with our lives burn up and drift away in ash. It's the loss of what could have been that hurts, not some sort of eternal chastisement. And the only person we will be able to blame for that is ourselves.

1 John 4:17 "This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus." (NIV)

1 John 2:28 "And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming." (NIV)

What an amazing moment! We will finally see and understand how God used us during our lives to further His purpose. Everything hidden will be revealed. We will see how every piece of our life's puzzle fit together and into the greater puzzle of human history. We will discover the impact of every decision we made on those around us, and how those decisions rippled through time, influencing future generations like concentric circles expanding forever on the surface of the waters of history.

Mark 4:1-23 "Again Jesus began to teach by the lake... He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: 'Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.' Then Jesus said, 'Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.' When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, '... The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop – some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred

times what was sown... Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear.' ” (NIV)

Ecclesiastes 12:13,14 “The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.” (NASB)

Every uncertainty will be fully explained and justified. God will answer all of our “whys” and “what ifs,” and in doing so He will demonstrate His righteousness and justice. He will successfully defend the fairness of every choice He made that impacted our lives. He will reveal His reasons, and His reasons will be good.

Isaiah 56:1,2 “Thus says the LORD, ‘Preserve justice and do righteousness, for My salvation is about to come and My righteousness to be revealed. How blessed is the man who does this...’ ” (NASB)

Daniel 2:20-22 “Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever... He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him.” (NIV)

1 Peter 4:12-19 “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed... Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

Matthew 10:26 “... for there is nothing concealed that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.” (NASB)

Revelation 15:3,4 “and *(those in heaven)* sang the song of God's servant Moses and of the Lamb: ‘Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the nations... For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.’ ” (NIV)

And through this, every heartbreak will be comforted, and every tear will be wiped away, not by an angel or some other proxy on God's behalf because He is too busy for us, but *by almighty God Himself!* He will with His own hand dry our tears, and we will finally have all of the answers that may have been absent in life.

Revelation 7:16,17 “They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore... for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.” (NASB)

Revelation 21:3,4 “And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, ‘Behold the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them, and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death;

there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.’ ” (NASB)

And with these answers will come great rewards.

The rewards (disproportionate and limitless).

These long awaited answers are great rewards in themselves, but God does not leave it at that. This is His party with the children He died for and has longed to unite in one family. And so He finally rewards His children in full for every act of genuine faith they chose throughout their lives, no matter how small.

Revelation 11:17,18 “... We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because... The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your people who revere your name, both great and small...” (NIV)

Matthew 10:42 “And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward.” (NASB)

Now before we begin to look at the types of eternal rewards God promises to bestow upon His faithful children, we should understand a couple of things. First consider this. In a sense, God does not reward us as we deserve. He rewards us *better* than we deserve. Our rewards are disproportionate to our faith, greatly in our favor. There is not a one-to-one parity between eternal rewards and acts of faith. It's a hundred-to-one pile up. God pours on the blessings, far exceeding what we deserve, because that is who He is – the merciful, generous, loving God who purchased our salvation through the blood of His Son. So be encouraged!

Colossians 2:2 “... be encouraged... attaining to all the wealth that comes from full assurance of understanding...” (NASB)

Romans 8:18,32 “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us... He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?” (NASB)

Matthew 19:28-30 “Jesus said to them, ‘I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne... everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.’ ” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 4:17,18 “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (NASB)

Luke 6:35-38 “But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men... Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure – pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 5:1-10 “For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven... we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.” (NASB)

Colossians 3:23,24 “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.” (NIV)

Hebrews 6:10-12 “God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him... We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.” (NIV)

Hebrews 11:6 “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (NIV)

Isaiah 49:23 “... those who hope in me (*God*) will not be disappointed.” (NIV)

Another thing to understand is that the eternal rewards described in God’s Word are pictures of things far too great for our finite minds to comprehend. In eternity there are literally no limitations. There are no boundaries. Our infinite God has infinite time and infinite resources to bless those He infinitely loves. How could we for one second truly expect to understand what He has in store?

1 Corinthians 2:9 “but just as it is written, ‘THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.’ ” (NASB)

Revelation 2:26-28 “He who overcomes... I will give him the morning star.” (NASB)

And so what we are about to look at are symbolic illustrations meant to impart a small glimpse of the wonders to come.

Three wreaths – Righteousness, Life, and Glory.

In the ancient world one of the highest rewards an athlete or soldier could receive was a garland or wreath to wear about his head. That might not seem like much of a reward to us, but actually it was quite incredible, because the wreath was a symbol of

an *entire package* of rewards that included tremendous honor, public acclaim, and wealth. This bundle of rewards represented by the wreath included:

- A victory parade in the person's honor.
- A section of city wall torn down for his entrance into the city, to be rebuilt and forever sealed with an inscription of his name and accomplishments.
- A large cash reward.
- Large annual stipends.
- A lifetime pass to the games.
- An ode composed in his honor.
- A statue commissioned in his honor.
- His children fed and educated at public expense.
- Exemption from taxes for life.
- Large tracts of land, and the income they generated.

People in the ancient world understood what these wreaths represented, so Paul used them in his writings to describe eternal rewards. In the following verses, these wreaths are referred to as “crowns,” but the Greek word for crown is *diadema*, which is not the word Paul uses in these passages. He uses the word *stephanos*, which describes a garland of leaves worn about the head; that is, a wreath.

1 Corinthians 9:24,25 “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown (*stephanos – or wreath*) that will not last; but we do it to get a crown (*stephanos – or wreath*) that will last forever.” (NIV)

There are several wreaths described in God's Word. There is the *wreath of righteousness*, awarded to those who persevere in following Jesus and do not forsake their love for Him.

2 Timothy 4:7,8 “I (*Paul*) have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown (*stephanos – or wreath*) of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for His appearing.” (NASB)

The *wreath of life* is awarded to those who not only persevere, but do so despite great hardship. Those who remain faithful to Jesus, even while enduring terrible suffering, will be honored and rewarded by the One they glorified through their faith.

Revelation 2:10 “Do not fear what you are about to suffer... that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation... Be faithful until death, and I (*Jesus Christ*) will give you the crown (*stephanos – or wreath*) of life.” (NASB)

James 1:12 “Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown (*stephanos – or wreath*) of life that God has promised to those who love Him.” (NIV)

Pastors, evangelists, and missionaries who faithfully serve God and others have a special wreath just for them called a *wreath of glory*.

1 Peter 5:1-4 “Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown (*stephanos – or wreath*) of glory.” (NASB)

Now let’s reconsider the bundle of earthly rewards that the ancient wreaths represented, and try to imagine how they might translate into eternal rewards.

- A victory parade, not before a city, but before all creation.
- A portion of the walls of the eternal city of Jerusalem, inscribed with your name forever.
- We can fairly assume there is no need for cash or stipends in eternity, but there certainly may be the eternal equivalent of what they can purchase.
- Admittance to exclusive events with amazing people who lived throughout history.
- Divine music and art created in your honor.
- Large tracts of the new universe for your enjoyment.

We can let our imaginations run wild. One thing is for certain, the actual rewards will be far, far, far better than anything we can presently envision.

Ephesians 3:20,21 “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.” (NIV)

Those who “overcome.”

A common theme that runs through all of the eternal rewards we will look at in this Coda is: They are designed for those who do not quit. They are not intended for

those who start out on the right path, but then turn aside or just sit down and stop moving forward. They are for those who don't give up. Where you start is not the issue, it's how you finish the race.

Galatians 6:9 “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 9:24 “... Run in such a way as to get the prize.” (NIV)

In the verses describing the next few eternal rewards, this is styled as those who “overcome.” God rewards those who, by His grace, overcome the adversity that life in a fallen world throws at them. There is no reward for avoidance, denial, surrender, or defection. God wants us to face these things head on and defeat them.

James 1:2-8 “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.” (NIV)

Our God is a God of victory, not compromise or negotiated settlements. He will help us overcome every regret, fear, and addiction, if we will let Him. He has given us His eternal Word as our unfailing light, so we can defeat every darkness. He has given us His empowering Spirit as our guide and strength, so we can defeat every weakness. And He promises He will never test us beyond our ability to endure. He loves us too much for that!

Psalms 20:1-9 “May the LORD answer you when you are in distress... May he send you help... May he give you the desire of your heart... Now this I know: The LORD gives victory to his anointed. He answers him from his heavenly sanctuary with the victorious power of his right hand. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God... we rise up and stand firm. LORD... Answer us when we call!” (NIV)

Psalms 149:4 “For the LORD takes delight in his people; he crowns the humble with victory.” (NIV)

1 John 5:4,5 “for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 15:57,58 “But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” (NIV)

2 Peter 1:2-4 “Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him... He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you might become partakers of the divine nature...” (NASB)

1 Thessalonians 5:5-28 “You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled... putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet... May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and He will do it... The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Micah 7:7,8 “But as for me, I will watch expectantly for the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me. Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy. Though I fall I will rise; though I dwell in darkness, the LORD is a light for me.” (NASB)

Ephesians 3:16 “... be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man,” (NASB)

Romans 8:26 “... the Spirit helps us in our weakness...” (NIV)

Hebrews 4:15,16 “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weakness, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need.” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 10:13 “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.” (NASB)

2 Chronicles 16:9 “For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His...” (NASB)

This does not mean we will achieve perfection in our lives. As we have seen, we will all at times stumble, because we are human. But we need not become incapacitated by anything. There is nothing with the power to hold us down and prevent us from accomplishing God’s purpose. If we will let Him, God will pick us up when we stumble, wash us clean, get us on the right path, and help us finish the race victoriously.

Ecclesiastes 7:20 “Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins.” (NASB)

Isaiah 44:22 “I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you.” (NIV)

Hebrews 12:1-13 “... let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith... strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for

your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.” (NASB)

Philippians 3:13,14 “... forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (NASB)

Psalms 37:1-24 “Do not fret because of those who are evil... Trust in the LORD and do good... Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your vindication like the noonday sun. Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him... The LORD makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him; though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand.” (NIV)

Jude 1:24,25 “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.” (NASB)

God’s children are not doomed to remain in bondage to those things that test our faith. Our Heavenly Father will break every chain and lead us to victory in every battleground as we trust in Him. We will overcome the hurt and sadness in the fallen world, and as we do, we will glorify God, illuminate the darkness, and receive blessings beyond our imagination.

Psalms 116:1-16 “I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live. The cords of death entangled me... I was overcome by distress and sorrow. Then I called on the name of the LORD... The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion... For you, LORD, have delivered me from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living. I trusted in the LORD... Truly I am your servant, LORD... you have freed me from my chains.” (NIV)

Psalms 107:1-43 “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story... they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress... Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love... for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things... He brought them out of darkness, the utter darkness, and broke away their chains... he breaks down gates of bronze and cuts through bars of iron... He sent out his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave... He turned rivers into a desert, flowing springs into thirsty ground... He turned the desert into pools of water and the parched ground into flowing springs... Let the one who is wise heed these things and ponder the loving deeds of the LORD.” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 4:6-10 “For God... has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves... that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.” (NASB)

1 Peter 4:11 "... If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen." (NIV)

Matthew 5:14-16 "You are the light of the world... Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." (NASB)

Ephesians 6:10-13 "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you may be able to stand firm... that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm." (NASB)

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." (NIV)

We have God's unbreakable promise that if we will trust in Him and rely on His grace, we will overcome. Let's see what God has in store for those who do.

The morning star and authority over the nations.

One of the rewards given to those who overcome is something called the *morning star*. The image of the morning star invokes feelings of hope and renewal. It heralds the end of the darkness of night and the coming of the light of day. It inspires courage and perseverance, with the promise of an impending sunrise. It also connotes leadership. The morning star is the light that leads us to the breaking dawn.

2 Peter 1:19 "So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts." (NASB)

With these things in mind, it's no surprise that the "Morning Star" is a special title given to Jesus during His 1000 year millennial reign, when He is revealed in all His glory. He was our hope – our promise that one day the night would end. He was the light the darkness could not dim, upon whom we could fix our gaze as we journeyed through the gloom of the fallen world. He is also the first light, and the leader of all that is to come. And when He returns to set up His kingdom on earth, His light shines forth as if a star has descended from heaven.

Revelation 22:16 "I, Jesus... am... the bright Morning Star." (NIV)

As Jesus sets up His millennial reign on earth, He rewards those who persevered in faith, hope, love, and service with *authority*. He will not rule alone, but with the help of those who served Him faithfully. And so those who overcome the distractions and assaults of the fallen world will one day be granted authority over it.

2 Timothy 2:11,12 “Here is a trustworthy saying... if we endure, we will also reign with him...” (NIV)

How will we know who has been granted this authority? They will receive from Jesus Himself something that makes the receipt of this honor unmistakable – a divine gift called the morning star!

Revelation 2:18-28 “... The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this: ‘I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first... he who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, TO HIM I WILL GIVE AUTHORITY OVER THE NATIONS; AND HE SHALL RULE THEM WITH A ROD OF IRON, AS THE VESSELS OF THE POTTER ARE BROKEN TO PIECES, as I also have received authority from My Father; and I will give him the morning star.’ ” (NASB)

This is one of those areas where our finite minds can’t really comprehend exactly what this might mean. Jesus – who *is* the bright Morning Star – gives those who love Him enough to overcome the world *their own* morning star, and together they will rule the nations for 1000 years.

Clothed in white and commended before the Father.

Another distinction in eternity for those who overcome is to be *clothed in white*. It’s interesting to note that at the transfiguration of Christ, when He was briefly revealed to Peter, James, and John in all His glory, Jesus was described as wearing dazzling white clothes, as bright as lightning.

Mark 9:2,3 “... Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.” (NIV)

Luke 9:28,29 “... Jesus... took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning.” (NIV)

Those who faithfully trust God throughout their lives, and overcome both the petty temptations and the mighty sufferings of a fallen world, are rewarded with similar clothing. Through this, they are uniquely identified with the One they chose to serve through every triumph and every heartbreak. They didn’t soil themselves in life with the base things of the world, and they are clothed in eternity with garments that reflect the purity of their choices.

But this blessing does not end there. After clothing His faithful servants in the same dazzling white He wears, Jesus leads them into the presence of the Father and His angels and commends them by name. Try to imagine that!

Revelation 3:4,5 “... you have a few people... who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white; for they are worthy. He who overcomes shall thus be clothed in white garments... and I will confess his name before My Father, and before His angels.” (NASB)

Next to Jesus on His throne.

When Jesus was resurrected, He is said to have ascended to heaven to sit down with the Father on His throne. Jesus overcame every temptation and every obstacle that threatened to prevent Him from accomplishing God’s plan for His life. He then stood before the Father and was invited to be seated next to Him.

Mark 14:61,62 “... Again the high priest asked him, ‘Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?’ ‘I am,” said Jesus. “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.’ ” (NIV)

Mark 16:19 “After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God.” (NIV)

Ephesians 1:18-23 “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.” (NIV)

Hebrews 1:3-13 “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs. For to which of the angels did God ever say... ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet?’ ” (NIV)

In the same way, when we overcome our unique trials and tribulations and then stand before Jesus, He invites us to sit down next to Him on His throne. Jesus honors us in the same way the Father honored Him!

Revelation 3:21 “He who overcomes, I (*Jesus*) will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.” (NASB)

The tree of life in the Paradise of God.

In heaven there appears to be a special place called the “Paradise of God,” of such richness and beauty we cannot even begin to imagine what it might be like. And within this paradise there is a “tree of life.” The tree of life is also mentioned in the garden of Eden (and is different from the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” in Genesis 2) and near the gates of eternal Jerusalem (see Revelation 22).

To those who overcome, Jesus grants the right to eat of this tree. It’s a reward that entails both admittance into an exclusive part of heaven, and entitlement to enjoy something that exists only there.

Revelation 2:7 “... To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God.” (NASB)

A white stone with a new name.

In the Roman culture, adoption was an important device through which wealth and power were transferred. Rather than leaving these things to biological heirs, who were often not worthy, they were left to adopted heirs. And part of the Roman adoption process involved receiving a white stone with a new, adopted name on it.

This imagery is used in the scriptures to describe another blessing for those who overcome. They receive a white stone from the Messiah, with a new name disclosed only to them. It’s as if they are adopted by Christ Himself, and become heir to all the blessings only He can provide.

Revelation 2:17 “... To him who overcomes, to him I will give... a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.” (NASB)

Pillars in the temple of God.

At the time of Christ, temple pillars were engraved with the accounts of history, so as you walked through a temple, you were reminded of the lives of great people. The scriptures state that those who overcome will be made a “pillar in the temple of My God,” meaning their life stories will be memorialized in the very temple of the living God for all eternity!

Revelation 3:12 “He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God...” (NASB)

Historical context.

In thinking about these eternal rewards, it's important to consider them in their historical context. To a modern audience, things like thrones, white robes, fruit bearing trees, and temple pillars have less impact. But to an ancient audience, they were profound. Kings sat on resplendent thrones and issued orders that dramatically affected the lives of millions of people. Clean, white clothes were only for the elite. Fresh fruit was a delicacy. White stones were like winning the lottery. Temple pillars were held in reverence and awe.

We can try to imagine modern equivalents of these things, but they would not really do them justice because culture and standards of living have dramatically changed. If you live in a western democracy, you might not have a throne, but you probably enjoy luxuries the kings of old did not. Just recognize that the rewards God wants to lavish on you translate into honor, excitement, and abundance far beyond anything we are able to presently conceive. And they will be ours, if by God's grace we chose to overcome.

1 Peter 1:3,4 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope... to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you,” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 4:17,18 “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (NASB)

Colossians 3:23,24 “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.” (NIV)

Misconceptions about Heaven (equality and boredom).

We tend to have serious misconceptions about heaven. One misconception relates to *equality*. In heaven, equality exists only in a limited sense. God certainly loves everyone equally, and everyone in heaven will know lasting eternal happiness. God will wipe away the tears from each of His children's eyes.

Revelation 21:1-4 “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away... And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He

will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.’ ” (NASB)

But rewards will be vastly unequal. Everyone’s lives are different, both in broad generalities and in subtle nuances. Our eternal rewards will be equally different. Some will have tremendous rewards, and others will have very little to show for their lives. That doesn’t mean they will spend eternity in misery. They will not. But the scripture is very clear that as God makes everything new and everything right, He rewards according to our faithfulness, and just as the depth and duration of our faith differs, our rewards will differ. This is part of the justice God ultimately brings to the world. Anything less would be unfair, and rob human history of its meaning.

Matthew 19:27-30 “Peter answered him (*Jesus*), ‘We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.’ ” (NIV)

Another misconception is that heaven will be *boring*. Nothing could be further from the truth! Remember, heaven is infinite. It is a place literally without boundaries of time, space, or possibilities. Our time there will never come to an end. The new universe we will inhabit will have no edge. God will finally be able to unleash His infinite creativity and power to delight His children. Our finite minds can’t even begin to grasp what this truly means.

But what we can certainly be assured of is that it will not be dull! We see pictures depicting heaven with haloed people in robes strumming harps while reclined on fluffy clouds, and it’s less than inspiring. But the brief descriptions we do have of heaven in the scriptures are absolutely nothing like that. We see a place that is vibrant and alive, filled with divinely inspired music and art. There is intensity and excitement. And after the completion of human history and the beginning of the eternal state, we can rest assured that God’s immeasurable artistry and power will delight us in ways we simply cannot presently imagine.

Revelation 4:1-6 “After this I (*John*) looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven... and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne. Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and

peals of thunder. In front of the throne, seven lamps were blazing... Also in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.” (NIV)

Revelation 5:8,9 “... the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God’s people. And they sang a new song...” (NIV)

Revelation 21:5-27 “He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’ Then he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true... It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children...’ One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls... said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel... The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb... The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone... The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass... I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it... but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.” (NIV)

Revelation 22:1-5 “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.” (NIV)

The question you should be asking yourself – The barrier to blessing.

As we consider all of these amazing things about heaven, there is a question that should pop into each of our heads if we want to experience all that God desires for us in eternity: *What do I need to overcome?*

It may be guilt. It may be an addiction. It may be some regret haunting your past, or some fear spoiling your future. It may be trauma, greed, disappointment, or doubt. It may be persecution for your faith. We could go on and on. There are plenty of things in this fallen world to make us stumble, create a foothold, and then hold us down, and we may be afflicted by many of them.

But there is *nothing* we cannot overcome by the power of God's grace! And that, in a sense, is what we are here on earth to do. We are born into a fallen world, where freewill is truly free. Both good and evil will exist. And each of us will have our own unique journey through life with major obstacles to overcome.

Romans 8:16-39 "... we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed... We... groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved... And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son... What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (NIV)

Psalms 23:1-6 "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." (NASB)

Psalms 25:4-9 "Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long. Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to

your love remember me, for you, LORD, are good. Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.” (NIV)

Hebrews 12:1-14 “... let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood... Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ‘Make level paths for your feet,’ so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.” (NIV)

Psalms 119:165 “Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.” (NIV)

But God uses the suffering inevitable in a fallen world to help us grow. As we overcome our hardships and come to know Joy and Peace regardless of our circumstances, our characters are molded into the likeness of Christ. Then God can use us in His service to accomplish His eternal plan and bring glory to Him and light to the world.

Proverbs 17:3 “The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tests hearts.” (NASB)

Job 23:10 “... when He has tested me, I will come forth as gold.” (NIV)

Philippians 2:14-16 “Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life...” (NASB)

1 Peter 2:10-17 “... you are the people of God... Live such good lives among the pagans that... they may see your good deeds and glorify God... Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men... For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

2 Corinthians 4:4-10 “... the god of this world (*Satan*) has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God... For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 3:3,18 “... you are a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts... And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord...” (NIV)

2 Corinthians 2:14,15 “... God... manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing;” (NASB)

And with our service comes reward. In life, we are rewarded first and foremost with Joy inexpressible and Peace surpassing comprehension. We know true happiness in a fallen world. We are also rewarded (in part) with other blessings, although as we have seen these blessings may be limited depending on God’s purpose for our lives.

Romans 15:13 “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (NIV)

Psalms 37:7-11 “Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him... for... the humble will... delight themselves in abundant prosperity.” (NIV)

1 Peter 5:6,7 “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.” (NIV)

Luke 6:35,36 “But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (NASB)

Luke 6:22,23 “Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven...” (NIV)

In eternity, we are rewarded in full. The limitations imposed by mortal bodies and how God may have chosen to use us to serve Him in a fallen world are no more. The time finally comes when God can reveal blessings long prepared but which no eye has seen, and no ear has heard, and which have been too wonderful to enter into the finite hearts of mankind.

1 Peter 1:3,4 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope... to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you,” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 2:9 “but just as it is written, ‘THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.’ ” (NASB)

The only possible barrier to us receiving these amazing eternal rewards is: Our own freewill. Will we choose to receive God's grace and overcome the challenges in our lives? The challenges are *not* the barrier. The challenges – no matter how insurmountable they seem – are nothing, because God's grace is infinitely greater than anything we may encounter, and we have God's promise that He will never test us more than our ability to overcome. The barrier is our *will*. That's the one thing God will not battle for us. That battle is our own, and where both our temporal and eternal destinies are made.

Deuteronomy 30:19,20 "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the LORD your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days..." (NASB)

Hebrews 13:5,6 "... He Himself has said, 'I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER FORSAKE YOU,' so that we confidently say, 'THE LORD IS MY HELPER, I WILL NOT BE AFRAID. WHAT WILL MAN DO TO ME?' " (NASB)

1 Corinthians 10:13 "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it." (NASB)

Joshua 24:15 "... choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve..." (NIV)

And so as we journey through life with an eye towards eternity, we should look for those things we are called to overcome. Focus on them. Pray about them. Meditate on them in the light of God's Word. Seek the wisdom and strength God's Spirit provides. Instead of looking upon them with dread, look at them with gratitude as divine opportunities God has given you to trust and serve Him and thereby be blessed. Welcome them as an integral part of God's plan for your life.

1 Peter 4:12-19 "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed... Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right." (NASB – 1975 ed.)

Matthew 5:11,12 "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me (*Jesus*). Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (NASB)

2 Corinthians 6:1-10 "... we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain... giving no cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry will not be discredited, but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger, in purity, in

knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love, in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left, by glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; regarded as deceivers and yet true; as unknown yet well-known, as dying yet behold, we live; as punished yet not put to death, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things.” (NASB)

Acts 5:40-42 “... They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.” (NASB)

James 1:2-12 “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him... Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.” (NASB)

Then overcome them one day at a time. How? By emulating the love of Jesus for God and others; that is, by trusting God day by day, and encouraging, counseling, and forgiving one another as each day requires. Said another way: Have faith in God, and as you encounter various trials, take your stand and speak the truth in love.

Psalms 37:3-40 “Trust in the LORD and do good... Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He will do it. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light... Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him... the humble will... delight themselves in abundant prosperity... the LORD sustains the righteous. The LORD knows the days of the blameless, and their inheritance will be forever... Wait for the LORD and keep His way, and He will exalt you... the salvation of the righteous is from the LORD; He is their strength in time of trouble. The LORD helps them and delivers them; He delivers them from the wicked and saves them, because they take refuge in Him.” (NASB)

Hebrews 3:12,13 “See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” (NIV)

Romans 12:10-21 “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor... rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (NASB)

1 Thessalonians 5:5-28 “You are all sons of the light and sons of the day... Therefore encourage one another and build each other up... Live in peace with each

other. And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus... Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil... May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and He will do it... The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Remember, God's grace is imparted like manna in the wilderness – just enough for one day. We are not going to be supernaturally zapped with all the grace we need to overcome every obstacle we will ever encounter for the rest of our lives. But we have God's unfailing promise that we will wake up every morning with everything we need to glorify God for that one day, if we will choose to do so. And as the days pass and we learn to consistently walk with Him, we will as the scriptures say "overwhelmingly conquer" every temptation and heartache that lies in our path. We will overcome!

Psalm 89:15-17 "Blessed are those who have learned to... walk in the light of your presence, LORD. They rejoice in your name all day long; they celebrate your righteousness. For you are their glory and strength..." (NIV)

Lamentations 3:21-25 "This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. The LORD'S lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. 'The LORD is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I have hope in Him.' The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him." (NASB)

Romans 8:31-39 "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things... Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (NASB)

Until one day, everything changes. The path comes suddenly to an end, and instead of another day in a fallen world, we experience a new day in the perfect world of eternity. God takes us by the hand, and leads us out of this life and into the next. And into eternity we bring with us only one thing.

THE ONLY THING ANYONE TAKES INTO ETERNITY.

Relationships: Our joy and crown.

We've all heard the phrase "you can't take it with you," and that's absolutely true when it comes to material things. God's Word warns us about spending our lives accumulating things that have no eternal value. In the arms of death, money, fame, and power all wither away, along with everything that comes with them.

Matthew 6:19-21 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (NIV)

1 Timothy 6:7-19 "For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it... Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs... pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith... Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life." (NIV)

But there is one thing we absolutely do take with us into eternity: Our *relationships*. First and foremost, we bring our relationship with God with us, and this becomes the basis for what our eternity is like. If our relationship with God was close, and we knew Him well and served Him faithfully, then the abundance of our eternal rewards reflects this closeness. If we knew Him a little, and at some point received Jesus as our Savior but then went our own way, then this distance is reflected in our lack of eternal rewards. And if we had no relationship with God at all, and spent our life in defiance of Him, then this absence of relationship is sadly what condemns us to hell, which is best described as the absence of the presence of God. We had no relationship with Him in time, so we have no relationship with Him in eternity.

Jeremiah 9:23,24 "Thus says the LORD, 'Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,' declares the LORD." (NASB)

1 Timothy 2:3,4 "... God our Savior... desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (NASB)

2 Peter 3:9 "The Lord is... patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance." (NASB)

2 Thessalonians 1:8,9 “... those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus... will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power,” (NASB)

2 Thessalonians 2:10 “... They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.” (NIV)

John 6:40 “For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son, and believes in Him will have eternal life...” (NASB)

We also carry into heaven our relationships with other believers. The bonds of friendship that are developed in time are not broken by death. Although we may lose people we love throughout our lives, one of the greatest comforts we have is that they are not lost forever. If we share a faith in Christ, then our Shepherd will one day gather us all together again, in a place with no more tears, pain, or death. And there these priceless relationships will deepen, grow, and thrive for all eternity.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 “Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him... And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.” (NIV)

John 11:25 “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies,’ ” (NASB)

1 Corinthians 15:52-58 “... the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed... For this perishable must put on the imperishable, this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, ‘DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP IN VICTORY. O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?’... thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.” (NASB)

Revelation 7:16,17 “They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore... for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.” (NASB)

Revelation 21:3,4 “And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.’ ” (NASB)

Ecclesiastes 7:2 “... death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart.” (NIV)

The Apostle Paul came from a privileged background, but he valued his relationships with God and fellow believers immeasurably more than the things of the world. He viewed the shared love of Christ as a catalyst for creating a community whose

citizenship was not of the world, but rather of heaven, with Christ as the head of all things. And he described these relationships as his “joy and crown.”

Philippians 3:4 to 4:1 “... If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I (*Paul*) have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus... Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!” (NIV)

Relationships are tremendously difficult. We are all imperfect people with strengths and weaknesses. We sin and fall short of God’s glory, and we will never come to the point where we love God or each other perfectly.

Psalms 41:9-12 “Even my close friend, someone I trusted, one who shared my bread, has turned against me. But may you have mercy on me, LORD; raise me up... uphold me and set me in your presence forever.” (NIV)

Philippians 3:12-16 “Not that I have... already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore... let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.” (NASB)

But relationships are also the only things that matter! They are the only things that truly last, because they are the only things we take with us into eternity. And so like Paul they should become our joy and crown – the things we derive our happiness from and perceive as our reward in life. They should be what we prize most, and what we devote our lives to nurturing.

Psalm 73:21-26 “When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” (NIV)

Matthew 6:24 “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” (NASB)

Romans 12:1-18 “... offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is... Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope... as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” (NIV)

This should begin with our relationship with God, and then spread into our relationships with other people. Why? Because in God, we have a partner in a relationship who is infinitely and absolutely holy and loving. He will always do what is right. He will always love us. And He will never change. That’s a friend we can count on, and in our relationship with Him we can establish a firm foundation upon which all other relationships can stand.

Psalm 62:1-12 “My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken... Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken. My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge... One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong, and that you, O Lord, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

2 Thessalonians 3:3 “... the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you...” (NASB)

Psalm 36:5-9 “Your lovingkindness, O Lord, extends to the heavens, Your faithfulness reaches to the skies... And the children of men take refuge in the shadow of Your wings. They drink their fill of the abundance of Your house;

and You give them to drink of the river of Your delights. For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light.” (NASB)

2 Timothy 2:13 “If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.” (NASB)

1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (NASB)

Hebrews 10:22-24 “let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith... Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds,” (NASB)

1 Timothy 6:17-19 “Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.” (NASB)

Proverbs 18:24 “One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.” (NIV)

In our relationships with other people, we have partners who will eventually fail us to one degree or another, not because they are evil, but because they are human. Spouses, children, parents, siblings, and friends – even the best – will at some point fail us. That is the human condition, and so these relationships are inherently volatile.

Proverbs 30:18,19 “There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a young woman.” (NIV)

1 Corinthians 2:5 “... your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.” (NASB – 1975 ed.)

But our underlying relationship with an infinitely faithful God provides the foundation of stability we need in order to make our unstable relationships with others grow and last. Because of our trust in the loving relationship we have with God, we will be able to find the strength to love and forgive others when they fail us. We know who we are as children of God. We do not fall apart or return evil for evil. We know we have our own failings for which God has had to forgive us. And so we can forgive others (or if necessary seek forgiveness from others) when our relationships are tested.

Ephesians 4:32 “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” (NASB)

1 Thessalonians 5:5-28 “You are all sons of the light and sons of the day... Therefore encourage one another and build each other up... Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays

back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus... Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil... May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and He will do it... The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Isaiah 26:3,4 "The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect peace, because he trusts in You. Trust in the LORD forever, for in GOD the LORD, we have an everlasting Rock." (NASB)

And in overcoming these tests through faith, hope, and love, our relationships are strengthened. Our friendships become deeper and more meaningful because they have weathered a storm. We develop a history full of priceless memories that last a lifetime and beyond. And our relationship with God is likewise strengthened, because it is only by His grace our relationships with others endure.

Proverbs 28:23 "He who rebukes a man will afterward find more favor than he who flatters with the tongue." (NASB)

Matthew 18:15 "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over." (NIV)

Proverbs 27:5,6 "Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses." (NIV)

Proverbs 17:10 "A rebuke impresses a discerning person more than a hundred lashes a fool." (NIV)

Psalms 116:1-7 "I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live... The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion... when I was in great need, he saved me. Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the LORD has been good to you." (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Psalms 40:1-4 "I waited patiently for the LORD; and He inclined to me and heard my cry. He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay, and He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; many will see and fear and will trust in the LORD. How blessed is the man who has made the LORD his trust, and has not turned to the proud, nor to those who lapse into falsehood." (NIV)

Do you want to fight for something? Fight for your relationships! Make them your priority. Don't let anything destroy them, beginning with your relationship with God, and then with your relationships with others. Treat anything that attempts to come between God and you, and then you and those you love, as an enemy. Make a relationship with God, based upon the light of His Word and the power of His Spirit, the most important thing in your life. Follow that with relationships with others equally centered around God's truth and presence. And as you do, everything else in your life will fall into place, and your eternity will be blessed beyond your ability to comprehend.

1 Timothy 1:18,19 "... fight the good fight, keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith."
(NASB)

2 Corinthians 10:3-5 "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." (NIV)

1 Timothy 6:7-15 "For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus... I charge you to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which God will bring about in his own time..." (NIV)

Nehemiah 4:14 "... Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes."
(NIV)

A day is coming...

We should live life with an eye towards death. Not in a macabre or unhealthy way, but with a mature understanding that as God's Word says: "Death is the destiny of everyone." Humbly take this to heart! Live every day as if it was your last. That doesn't mean quitting your job, liquidating your assets, and heading for the Bahamas, or doing anything else that is likewise impulsive or irresponsible. It means: Serve!

Ecclesiastes 7:2 "... death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart." (NIV)

Hebrews 4:7 "... just as has been said before, 'TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS.'" (NASB)

Hebrews 3:12,13 "See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called 'Today,' so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness." (NIV)

Ephesians 5:2-20 "... walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God... For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find

out what pleases the Lord... Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil... speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (NIV)

Matthew 23:11,12 “The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (NIV)

Jeremiah 15:19 “... If you repent, I (*God*) will restore you that you may serve me...” (NIV)

Serve God and others with all your heart every day you are blessed to experience. Live it in such a way that if Jesus was to return, or death arrive at your door, you are proud of how you have expended the gift of life.

2 Timothy 2:15 “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.” (NASB)

2 Timothy 1:6-9 “... fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you... God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord... by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Job 11:13-18 “... if you devote your heart to him (*God*)... if you put away the sin that is in your hand... then you will lift up your face without shame; you will stand firm and without fear... You will be secure, because there is hope...” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Our years, no matter how many, are so short! Every day we are not drawing closer to God and loving one another is truly a wasted day that will never return to us. It’s contempt for the precious space we are allotted in the great tapestry of human history.

Psalms 103:1-18 “Praise the LORD, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name... forget not all his benefits – who forgives all your sins... crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things... The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love... he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD’s love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children’s children – with those who keep his covenant...” (NIV)

Psalm 90:1-17 “Lord... Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. You turn people back to dust, saying, ‘Return to dust, you mortals.’ A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night. Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death – they are like the new grass of the morning: In the morning it springs up new, but by evening it is dry and withered... Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures; yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away... Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom... Have compassion on your servants. Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days... May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us; establish the work of our hands for us – yes, establish the work of our hands.” (NIV)

Grow where you are planted. Serve wherever you are. You don’t have to head out for the jungles of South America to serve God, unless that is where you are called in His plan. Make the most of *this* day, *wherever* you are, *whatever* you are doing. Then when your last day arrives, your life will have been all that God intended.

Colossians 4:2-6 “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful... Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.” (NIV)

Ephesians 5:1-20 “Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God... For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them... Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil... be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (NIV)

Colossians 3:23,24 “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.” (NIV)

1 John 2:17 “The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.” (NIV)

In this life we experience so much. Excitement, pain, laughter, tears, victories, failures, boredom. And inevitably, it’s a struggle. We wrestle with our nature to sin, sometimes winning the battle and sometimes suffering terrible defeat.

Romans 7:15 through 8:38 “I (*Paul*) do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!... because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death... Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires... the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit... those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship... The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ... what, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Galatians 5:1-25 “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery... You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want... The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.” (NIV)

But a day is coming when the struggle will end. The tale of your life in a fallen world will be over, and your new life in a perfect world will begin. May we all live our lives in a way that makes us proud to tell our story throughout eternity!

Psalm 107:2-43 “Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story... they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way... Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind, for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things... they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness, the utter darkness, and broke away their chains. Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds... tell of his works with songs of joy... Let the one who is wise heed these things and ponder the loving deeds of the LORD.” (NIV)

2 Timothy 4:1-8 “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.” (NIV)

2 Peter 3:3-18 “... understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, ‘Where is this “coming” he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.’... But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him... Therefore, dear friends, since you have been forewarned, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of the lawless and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord

and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.”
(NIV)

Epilogue

So, here we are, at the end of a rather lengthy work on what is perhaps the most difficult question in our common experience: How can I be happy in this crazy, messed up world?

Do we have all the answers now? Of course not. We will never have the answers to everything in this place. The questions that arise from life in a fallen world are nearly infinite, while our ability to comprehend the ways of God in our mortal bodies is severely limited. As we have seen, we'll get our answers in heaven from God Himself, but until then we will always coexist with the specters of the unanswerable.

But instead of "all the answers" God gives us something more suited to life in a fallen world – someone to trust. We are offered a relationship with Him that is real and alive. We are presented with an opportunity to place our trust in a holy, loving God who is the Creator of the universe and everything in it, and through our faith become a part of His family.

In this life we are presented with countless choices between the light of God and the darkness of the world. If we chose to follow God into His light, we come to know Him through faith in His Son, Jesus. And faith brings hope, and hope brings love, and together these things transform us into the likeness of Christ. Our lives become a living sacrifice of service to God and others. We are purged of defiance, fear, and hate, and through all of this God imparts to us Joy inexpressible and Peace surpassing comprehension. We get what we long for, not because suddenly we have all the answers, but because we love and are loved by the One with whom all answers reside. After all, answers in and of themselves never made anyone happy. Happiness only comes from love.

How can you tell if someone knows Joy and Peace? Look in their eyes. It resides there like a light. It will come from deep within, not from the surface. And it will shine when it shouldn't. Anyone can beam when things are rosy. Those who know Joy and Peace will shine in what appears to be their darkest hour, because the light within them is not of this world, but rather of the Heavenly Father who transcends the world.

Look into your own eyes and know this: Joy and Peace are achievable. They are the inheritance of every child of God. They are God's destiny for you, no matter who you are or what you may be facing. God longs for you to experience them. What father does not want his child to be happy? But He will not force them on you. You must humbly choose to receive them, through faith, hope, and love. The choice is yours. God has done everything He possibly can for you. What now remains in order to know Joy and Peace in a fallen world is: To choose. Choose well!

Ephesians 1:18,19 “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe...” (NASB)

Psalms 37:4 “Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart.” (NASB)

Isaiah 30:18 “Therefore the LORD longs to be gracious to you, and therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you. For the LORD is a God of justice; how blessed are all those who long for Him.” (NASB)

Ephesians 3:14-21 “For this reason, I (*Paul*) bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.” (NASB)

Colossians 3:14-17 “Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts... Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you... Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.” (NASB)

2 Corinthians 13:11-13 “Finally, brothers, good-bye. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you... May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” (NIV – 1984 ed.)

Jude 1:24,25 “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.” (NASB)

A Personal Note

Let me tell you something, writing about Joy and Peace is a humbling experience, because I can't honestly say for one minute that I know either one of them.

I'm passable at Peace (although it may be better described as stoicism) and really lousy at Joy. I would not describe myself as a joyful person. So as I finish this work, I can't help but feel a bit hypocritical.

During the writing of this thing I've also committed some God-awful sins, but given that the basic ideas and structure for this work date back thirty years, and it took me fourteen years to write it all down, I suppose that's to be expected. You've probably committed some whoppers during that time as well. I won't throw stones at you, and I hope you will likewise give me a break, or at least aim poorly.

I know this is long, but my main criticism (other than my shortcomings as a writer) is that it's too short. Each little subheading can and should be a volume in itself. Use them as a springboard for further learning. This is a subtle and far-reaching subject, and in my opinion it's far beyond the reach of any pithy little book you can pick up at the grocery store. This is not meant to be the equivalent of a fad diet from a peddler of spiritual snake oil. It's meant to be an introduction to a life-long pursuit.

I think what I've got out of this is not that I now know Joy inexpressible and Peace surpassing comprehension, but I now have a glimpse of what these inexpressible and surpassing things are, and what I need to do if I want to experience them. I hope you do too, and I wish you well!

Romans 15:13 "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him..." (NIV)