

HIS POWER FOR YOUR WEAKNESS

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**260 Steps Toward Spiritual
Strength**

John W. Selcher

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His Power for Your Weakness: 260 Steps Toward Spiritual Strength

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Dedication

I dedicate this book to Diane Selcher and Kelly Selcher

Diane, without your support and encouragement during the last 45 years, this resource wouldn't have been possible.

Kelly, I appreciate your suggestions that helped transform blog posts into discipleship resources. Thank you for using your artistic and technical abilities to revitalize my website.

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INTRODUCTION

Christianity is about more than your salvation. Daniel wrote, “Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever” (Daniel 12:3, NIV). This resource helps you become more like Jesus. It also equips you to lead others to righteousness so they can shine like the stars forever and help still others do the same! That involves sharing it. It includes passing the challenge on and on and on. For that, you need God’s power for your weakness!

Working through *His Power for Your Weakness* takes about nine months. I numbered daily readings from 1–260. Do one each day. You’ll also be reading one chapter a day in the New Testament. You’ll begin with Matthew 1. Your spiritual growth is more closely connected to your time reading and applying God’s word to your life than anything else. Dr. Thom Rainer observed, “Validated research indicates a direct correlation between daily Bible reading and discipleship as having the greatest impact. We shouldn’t be surprised that reading the word of God has a greater impact than mentoring, programs, or small group involvement.”¹ That rings true in my own life.

Your devotional life is critical. Pro-Christ and anti-Christ forces battle for your soul. Ignoring its daily feeding has lasting consequences. Personal devotions don’t guarantee spiritual fruitfulness without obedience. But their absence guarantees a spiritual crop failure. Daily devotions are an important part of following Jesus. There’s no substitute for first-hand spiritual experience. There’s no shortcut to Christian maturity.

God’s word is connected with cleansing (Psalm 119:9), delight (Psalm 119:16), life (1 Peter 1:23), strength (Psalm 119:28), hope (Psalm 119:81), direction (Psalm 119:105), understanding (Psalm 119:130), spiritual fruit (Matthew 13:23), stability (Matthew 24:35), sanctification (John 17:17), spiritual strengthening (Acts 20:32) and truth (Ephesians 1:13). Like a mirror, His word shows you your spiritual blemishes. It transforms your mind to think and be more like Jesus. Spiritual output is dependent on spiritual input. You’ve enough time to do God’s will every day. That includes inputting His word into your heart.

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Choose a quiet place and a consistent time to meet with God. Spend time with Him when your mind is sharpest. Record what He's teaching you and how you can apply it. The goal is personal transformation. Focus on what God's word is saying about loving Him, loving those in need, loving other believers, and loving your enemies. Consider how it applies to your habits, work, witness, finances, and ministry. Choose a favorite verse from your reading. Write a personal application. Use it as a basis for prayer.

Chapter 1

HIS TRUSTWORTHINESS FOR YOUR TRUST

God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:9 NIV

1 The Surest Thing

A sure thing is something certain with no doubt whatsoever. Such things and events are scarce as calluses on a fashion model's hands. Death, taxes, robocalls, spam, and fraud make the list. Not much else. It's short because you live in an uncertain world.

Where's the bedrock on which you can stand amid the shifting sand of an ever-changing, uncertain world? Old Testament characters frequently swore an oath, "As surely as the LORD lives..." to make their statements more believable (King Saul in 1 Samuel 28:10). "As surely as the LORD lives" appears thirty-three times in the Old Testament. The LORD's living is surer than tomorrow's sunrise, water's running downhill, or a Florida vacation's punctuation with mosquito bites.

The good news is the LORD lives. The better news is He promises His presence to those who trust and obey Him. He will live with them. He promised Moses His presence and rest (Exodus 33:14). He promised His presence when two or three gather to deal with His sinning followers (Matthew 18:20). He abides in those who abide in love (1 John 4:16). He promised He'd be with and keep Jacob, wherever he went (Genesis 28:15). He promises He won't leave or forsake His followers (Hebrews 13:5). He promises His presence in life's darkest valleys (Psalm 23:4). Someday, He'll dwell with His people, and they'll enjoy His presence forever (Revelation 21:3). The LORD lives is the surest thing!

How did the LORD's living certainty affect how you thought, felt, and behaved yesterday? Read Matthew 1.

2 Sure Things

Part of wisdom is separating sure things from pretenders. “Sure things” involving people are an endangered species. Friends make promises, but don’t keep them. Advertisers overpromise and underdeliver. Humans eventually fail you.

Even things you think are sure aren’t necessarily. Tonight, there’s a 100 percent chance of darkness (unless it’s June 21st and you’re at the North Pole!). One-hundred-degree temperatures make you sweat (but older folks wear sweaters!). Rivers flow into other rivers or oceans (but the Jordan River, ends in a landlocked lake). Most human beings twist the truth to benefit themselves. A few don’t.

Can assurance that you’re a child of God ever be a “sure thing”? Absolutely! It can be because God doesn’t lie. “God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?” (Numbers 23:19, NIV). The assumed answer to both questions is “no.” Jesus Christ is God’s one and only Son, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

Assurance that you’re God’s child rests eternally and unshakably on God’s trustworthy promises. When you receive Jesus as your Forgiver and Leader, you become God’s child (John 1:12). When you invite Jesus into your life, He will enter and fellowship with you (Revelation 3:20). You have eternal life now, and God won’t condemn you (John 5:24, 1 John 5:13). Jesus suffered for your sins to bring you to God (1 Peter 3:18). He rose from the dead (Mark 10:34). More than five hundred people saw Him (1 Corinthians 15:6). Your assurance isn’t based on your undependable performance. It depends on a dependable God’s keeping His promises! That’s a sure thing!

*How does God’s keeping His promises being a sure thing make you feel?
Read Matthew 2.*

3 Would Your Horoscope Lie to You?

Throughout most of history, astrology was an intellectual pursuit. Now it’s considered a pseudoscience. It has no scientific validity or explanatory power.¹ For thousands of years people looked to the stars and planets to interpret the events of life. Astrology in the

West includes horoscopes. They explain your personality and what will happen to you based on when you were born. Believing horoscopes is living according to someone else's baseless guesses rather than your own. How can you tell an astrologer making \$100 or more per hour is lying to you? Watch for moving lips.

Why do people consult astrologers? They want to know information about their lives that's just not available at any price. They're looking for power and control when life veers out of control. Astrologers, like politicians, are liars who pretend to help you. They're really taking care of themselves.

So, how do you interpret the uninterpretable? You trust in the One who knows everything about everything. He works all things together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28). He knows the names of the sextillions of stars He created (Psalm 147:4). Do you think He knows your name and circumstances too? Of course! Take comfort that He who didn't withhold His only Son but sacrificed Him for you will also freely give along with Him what you really need (Romans 8:32). Trust in God is the antidote for life's adversity. Ask Him for wisdom (James 1:5). Trust the light of His word to guide you (Psalm 119:105).

How does it make you feel that God knows your name and circumstances and will freely give you all you really need? Read Matthew 3.

4 Believing in God Is Not Enough (1)

About thirty years ago George Barna found that 74% of American adults strongly agreed and 12% agreed somewhat that “there is only one true God, who is holy and perfect, and who created the world and rules it today.”¹ If that's so, why were the moral values of our society “circling the drain” then and even more so today?

James connected belief and behavior when he wrote, “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead (James 2:26, NIV). If people don't live their “beliefs,” do they really believe them? The Greek word for “believe” means “to persuade, give credit to, trust, or confide in.”²

Belief is only as good as its object. If you trust a friend to repay a dollar she borrowed, her failure won't ruin you. Sometimes, belief

puts your life at stake. Some who have trusted a barrel to protect them during a plunge over Niagara Falls have been disappointed to death! My mother trusted a doctor to operate on her competently. He didn't. She died. Daily, you risk your life when you trust other drivers to remain on their side of the road and not hit you.

Believe is an action word. Robert Chesebrough believed in the healing properties of the Vaseline he invented. He repeatedly burned, cut, and scratched himself to demonstrate his trust in it. People could see the wounds now healed and scarred over and realize both the value of Vaseline and the depth of Robert's faith in it.³ Do your daily actions demonstrate your faith in God?

"Believe" is a relationship word. Most people believe that God exists. Few have a relationship with Him that affects the way they live. John Paton translated the New Testament into the language of the New Hebrides in the South Sea Islands. Their language didn't have a word for "believe" in the sense of trust. Finally, he found a solution. Paul and Silas told the Philippian jailor that God would save him if he believed in the Lord Jesus (Acts 16:31). Paton's translation was, "Lean your whole weight upon the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved."⁴

*How do your words and actions demonstrate that you're following Jesus?
Read Matthew 4.*

5 Believing in God Is Not Enough (2)

Belief is more than agreeing that God exists. The demons believe that (James 2:19). But they'll be on the wrong side of the pearly gates. Belief is more than agreeing that the Bible is true, that Jesus is God's Son, and that He died on the cross for the sins of the world.

True belief includes trusting in and doing what God says. Such faith transforms your "ugly duckling" character into an increasingly beautiful "swan." Without it, you can't please God (Hebrews 11:6).

Amid life's unpredictable, ever-changing circumstances, Christians keep their eyes on Jesus. They don't rely on faith or their own goodness. They trust their eternal destiny to Jesus alone and His finished work on the cross. They depend upon His resources to meet everyday problems. He's the same yesterday, today, and forever

(Hebrews 13:8). Circumstances change. He doesn't. The Christian trusts Jesus' character and promises.

Belief centers on a living person. Jesus rose from the dead and is alive today! In 2016 the American people didn't elect George Washington. They selected and put their faith in a living person. Christians put their faith in Jesus. They know Him, and He knows them (John 10:14). They listen to His voice (John 10:27). They share His peace (John 14:27), joy (John 15:11), resources (John 16:24), and mission (John 20:21). He's their Shepherd. He loves them (John 15:9) and gives His life for them (John 10:15).

God's final judgment is a raging class-five hurricane somewhere over the horizon. No radar can detect it. Jesus is the Captain of the only ship, the church, which will survive it. No one forces you to enter His vessel and join His crew. You can build your boat and captain it yourself. You can take your chances with another boat. The choice is real and personal.

Don't imagine you're inside a safe ship with a decision to stay or leave. You're in a rocking rowboat. The question isn't whether the hurricane will hit—it's when. Rejecting Jesus' offer to take you aboard means you're still in the rowboat. Putting off the decision means the same. Your decision is the most important you'll ever make. It has eternal consequences. Belief is a personal response. You can accept or reject Jesus and all He offers. Putting the choice off is rejection on the installment plan.

How will you show today that your faith is more than just mental agreement with facts about Jesus? Read Matthew 5.

6 Believing in God Is Not Enough (3)

Christian belief brings you into a right relationship with God. Romans 8:16–17 (NIV) describes that relationship: “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.”

Faith transforms relationships with others. “We know that we've passed from death to life because we love each other. Anyone who doesn't love remains in death. Anyone who hates a brother or sister

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is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him. 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” (1 John 3:14–16, NIV).

Faith changes you. It’s summarized in 2 Corinthians 5:17 as becoming a new creation. You’ve got a new sense of freedom because God removes your guilt and forgives your sin. You’ve got a new desire to please God and a new servant attitude toward others. You possess a new love for other Christians. You discover a new power over sin and a new joy and confidence. You find a new supply road opened to God’s storehouse through prayer.

In early April 1978, I drove fifty miles from Fargo, North Dakota, to Cormorant Lake, Minnesota, to ice fish. At the lake, I discovered that two feet of open water around the shoreline bordered the frozen expanse. I wasn’t about to give up. Although my faith was shaking as much as my knees, I took a deep breath and jumped. I feared the milky white edge would break when I landed. It didn’t! When I drilled a hole about fifty yards from shore, I discovered the ice was thirty-seven inches thick. Although my faith was weak, the yard of frozen water wasn’t. God is like that ice. When you believe, you take a leap of faith. You land on the bedrock trustworthiness of God’s character and promises. It’s not the size of your faith, but whether you place it, small or great, in the trustworthy One.

Believing in Jesus includes your intellect, emotions, will, and body. Faith isn’t contrary to the facts of history. The evidence for Jesus’ resurrection is substantial. Yet faith is more than merely agreeing that Jesus is all He claimed. If you depend on feelings to gauge your relationship with God, your spiritual life will resemble an elevator! Responding to God is a choice. It includes giving God your body (Romans 12:1). Don’t you think you could trust someone with your body who sacrificed His body for you?

Why does depending on your feelings to gauge your closeness to God bring great instability to life? Read Matthew 6.

7 Believing in God Is Not Enough (4)

Belief has content, but you need to go beyond just agreeing with the facts. The first four letters of the alphabet summarize the narrow way that leads to eternal life.

A represents admit. To begin a right relationship with God, you must admit you have a disease the Bible calls sin. The symptoms are denial of God's right to rule over you, rejection of His moral boundaries, and a right-living deficit. If you ignore this disease, the inevitable result is separation from God forever (Romans 6:23).

B is what you need to believe. Becoming a Christian requires knowing Jesus is Lord and God in the flesh who has come to your rescue. He became as fully human as you and died on the cross in your place to pay the penalty for your sins (1 Peter 3:18). He's alive forever because of His resurrection. He asks for your loyalty. He offers to live within you and use His resurrection power to set you free from the paralyzing grip of sin (John 8:36).

C is consider the cost of following Jesus. Jesus said that the one who tries to save his life will lose it (Luke 9:24). Three questions sum up the cost. Will you let Christ clean up the wrong things in your life? Will you give Him the king's chair of your life? Will you publicly identify with Him and His church?

D stands for doing something. You need to receive the gift God offers—Jesus. In John 1:12, “receive” means “believe.” If I offer you a twenty-dollar bill and ask whether you believe it's yours, you demonstrate your belief by taking it. Faith is active. Revelation 3:20 pictures Jesus knocking at the closed door of an individual's life. It's dark inside. The place stinks. The lazy boy in the living room is the “king's chair.” The house represents your life. Jesus offers to come in, turn on the light and clean up the mess. He wants the king's chair because He alone is qualified to run the new operation. He's cleaned and lighted hundreds of millions of other homes. Will you let Him do the same for you? Have you ever invited Jesus to come into your life and take control? If not, are you ready to open the door of your life to Jesus now? One way to say yes is through the following prayer. The words aren't magic. They reflect the heart of someone ready to follow Jesus:

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Lord Jesus, thank you for dying on the cross in my place and taking my sin, death, and judgment upon yourself. I open the door of my life to you. I want you to come into my life and take control. Turn on the light and clean up the mess. Thank you for forgiving my sins and making me a child of God. I want to be like you. Amen.

If these words express what you really want, make them your own. Realize that you're talking to the living Lord Jesus. He knows your sincerity and will honor the invitation to come into your life.

When did you invite Jesus to come into your life and take control?

Read Matthew 7.

8 Believing in God Is Not Enough (5)

Jesus promises, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me" (Revelation 3:20, NIV). He said if you open the door of your life to Him, He'll come in. He keeps His promises. You can depend on it! Don't expect a wonderful feeling inside. God honors active belief. "And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever doesn't have the Son of God doesn't have life" (1 John 5:11–12, NIV). God promises eternal life to all who have Jesus, the Son. If you have Jesus, you have eternal life. Take God's word for it! Don't depend on your feelings. They can lead you astray very quickly.

Now what? Here are six suggestions to grow in your relationship with Jesus.

Read the Bible daily. Begin with Matthew. Write briefly in a notebook what you've learned and will try to apply to your life (1 Peter 2:2).

Pray daily asking Jesus to control you and show you how to apply the Bible to your life to make you more like Him. Turn your worries into prayers (Philippians 4:6–7).

Attend worship in a local church (Hebrews 10:24–25; Luke 4:16).

Join a discipleship group that will nurture your faith.

Share your time, talents, and treasures cheerfully. Jesus wants to serve others through you. Tell others how you received Him and the difference He has made in your life.

Yield continuously to the control of the Holy Spirit of Christ who lives in you (Ephesians 5:18).

Which of the six disciplines will you add to your to-do list?

Read Matthew 8.

9 I Became a Christian—Now What?

Deciding to follow Jesus is step one of a life-long commitment to change how you think, feel, and behave. Marathon runners train for their event. As they discipline themselves to run faster, so must you to live better. The goal is becoming like Jesus (Romans 8:29). Only God can make “chicken salad” (the Jesus-like) out of “chicken feathers” (the self-centered). You must exert ongoing effort and make continual sacrifices—just like Olympic marathon gold medalists.

Discipleship self-destructs without discipline. The Apostle Paul said, “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.” (Philippians 3:12, NIV). Earthly achievements don’t compensate for spiritually unfruitful living. Helping the needy impresses God more than making newspaper headlines, accumulating multi-millions, or winning awards. “Then he said to them all: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me (Luke 9:23, NIV).

A Bossa Nova zucchini bears its first fruit in 37 days. It produces more fruit as it continues to grow. You can influence others for Christ right now. But Christian maturity requires at least two years. Daily reading and understanding the Bible and applying it to life are discipleship essentials. The Bible’s spiritual food feeds and reprograms your mind to cherish what Jesus values. “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation” (1 Peter 2:2, NIV). Only God can make sorghum and yams grow. Only He can enable you to grow spiritually. The spiritually mature apply the Bible wisely to life’s daily decisions.

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Other essentials for spiritual growth include talking with God daily (prayer), worshiping with other believers, and obeying Jesus, your spiritual leader.

How has discipline helped you accomplish a goal? What will be your next step in applying spiritual disciplines to become more like Jesus? Read Matthew 9.

Chapter 2

HIS FORGIVENESS FOR YOUR SINS

in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

COLOSSIANS 1:14 NIV

10 A Deadly Assumption

“I’m okay” or “I’m good.” The words unthinkingly gush from my mouth when others ask how I am. I know most people don’t really want to know anyway. If I tell them, they might never speak to me again!

You say you’re okay when you know you’re not. “I’m okay!” (but I only slept three hours last night because I kept replaying the hurtful words a co-worker fired at me yesterday). “I’m okay!” (but I’m afraid my abdominal pain might be cancer). “I’m okay!” (but I’ve been so down lately the needle on my energy tank is on empty).

You know you’re not okay. But in the spiritual realm, like the church at Laodicea, you’re likely to pretend you are. Because of Laodicea’s lukewarm deeds, Jesus threatened to spit them out of His mouth. They thought they were not only okay but also rich and didn’t need a thing. Jesus said they were “wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked” (Revelation 3:17, NIV). They needed to perceive and correct their lukewarmness.

The primary evidence you’re guilty of a deadly assumption is complacency about your “wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked” condition. Before applying spiritual truth to others, apply it to yourself. Quit considering exposure to the truth you don’t apply as a virtuous spiritual shower. It’s not. Be a stable, wise person who hears Jesus’ words and acts on them. Quit being the unstable, foolish one who hears but doesn’t live according to His words (Matthew 7:24–27). True repentance is agreeing with God that you’re not okay—you’re broken. Submit to His healing love, forgiveness, and transforming power, and cease pretending you’re okay when you’re not.

How is insisting we're okay when we're not, hazardous to our spiritual health? Read Matthew 10.

11 Handling Guilt God's Way

I feel guilty when I waste food. When I was growing up, I had to serve myself at least a little of every kind of food that was prepared. Then, I had to eat everything on my plate, whether I liked it or not. It's good not to waste food, but these two rules don't carry divine authority. Your real guilt problem is that where God says don't, you did, and where He says to do, you didn't... repeatedly. How do you manage genuine guilt in God's way?

You're guilty because you've fallen short of God's standards. You attempt to compensate for your failures through good works. I knew a Christian man who was unfaithful to his wife. Guilt haunted him for the rest of his life. I'm guessing much of what he did in the church was an effort to make up for his failure. Forgiveness is God's solution to your futile efforts to make yourself respectable. He wants to free you from the guilt of your failures so you can live all out for Him. "The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! For this reason, Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant." (Hebrews 9:13–15, NIV).

The best news ever is that God accepts you as you are. Jesus died for the ungodly (Romans 5:6). You've fallen short of God's infinite perfection in all He is and does (Romans 3:23). You deserve death because of your disobedience, yet God's gift is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 6:23). Trust in Jesus' all-sufficient sacrifice and feelings of guilt can't fill you at the same time. When faith comes, guilt goes. Trusting in the sufficiency of what Jesus did on the cross for you flushes away guilt. In Jesus you have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance

with the riches of God's grace (Ephesians 1:7). By grace through faith God releases you from guilt's chains so you can live all out for Him.

Do guilty feelings make you feel closer or farther from God? How is trust in God's provision for your sin like flushing a toilet? Read Matthew 11.

12 Bad Enough for Heaven?

Bad enough for heaven? That sounds exactly wrong. Everyone knows good people go to heaven, right? Well, not exactly.

You're more like the singers Simon Cowell criticized on American Idol than you realize. They were good in their own eyes but not even close to good in his. You might be good in your own eyes. But you're not even close to good in your Judge's eyes. God defines goodness as being just like Jesus. Nothing less will do. You fall short of that perfect, unchangeable standard that Romans 3:23 defines as God's glory. No one does good (Romans 3:12).

Recognizing your badness (compared to Jesus) is both saner and safer than proudly depending on your goodness. Your badness doesn't disqualify you from a relationship with God. Your imagined goodness does. On February 20, 2019, I heard someone on the radio say that God's measuring stick isn't how good or bad you are. It's how humble or proud you are. That's exactly right. The spiritually proud have nothing in common with Jesus. He described Himself as "humble in heart" (Matthew 11:29). Recognizing your badness is the first step to acknowledging you need God's grace.

God gives grace (undeserved favor) to the humble. But he resists the proud (James 4:6). Patting yourself on your good old back exposes you to the hurricane-headwinds of your Creator's opposition. It shows you don't understand how far short of Jesus' goodness you fall. It shows you don't comprehend your need for God's undeserved favor. Recognizing your badness is far healthier than trumpeting your goodness. So, are you bad enough for heaven?

*Why do humble and bad people, not proud and good people go to heaven?
Read Matthew 12*

13 My Bad!

Samples of Lake Erie water can look like pea soup because of blue-green algae called *Microcystis*. Swimming in its presence can cause diarrhea, vomiting, and blistering around the mouth. It covered two thousand square miles of Lake Erie in 2011 and 700 square miles in 2017. Why?

The Great Black Swamp was southwest of Lake Erie. After people drained it, it became three million acres of corn, soybeans, and alfalfa. Fertilizer high in phosphorus is often overapplied there. It produces wonderful crops and terrible pollution. The amount of rain is also a factor. The fertilizer runs off the fields. The Maumee River carries it into Lake Erie. Erie's blue-green algae population explodes. It sucks up these nutrients like trillions of miniature vacuum cleaners. Interestingly, these alfalfa, corn, and soybean farmers agree. They all think fertilizer runoff causes the blue-green algae problem. They think somebody else is responsible. They're not overapplying fertilizer.

You naturally resist taking responsibility for the messes you cause. The mirror is the best place to start when identifying the source of your problems. I usually don't have to look anywhere else.

Aaron didn't take responsibility for creating the golden calf when he said, "They said to me, 'Make us gods who will go before us.... So I told them, 'Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.' Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!" (Exodus 32:23–24, NIV). Right! Like the kid standing beside a shattered vase who says, "It broke itself!" Mature people assume blame they don't deserve. Immature people don't take deserved blame.

How will you respond to deserved or undeserved blame directed your way today? Read Matthew 13.

14 When the Mouse Thinks It's a Cat

You're a control freak! You resent it when others tell you what to do or preach to you. You insist on being the unchallenged king or queen of your domain. You're allergic to criticism. You're immune to unsolicited advice. You know what's best for you! You're the cat in

the cat-and-mouse relationship. Life is the mouse. You play with it for as long as you can, and then you devour it.

Sometimes forbidden desires tempt you. You playfully maneuver them with the paws of your mind. The Bible calls them sin. They often take the form of coveting something you can't have (Romans 7:8). You know you shouldn't be going there, but it seems harmless enough. You're in control and can stop anytime you want. You're the cat, sin is the mouse, and you're in control!

At the risk of preaching, may I suggest you have it exactly wrong? Sin is the cat, and you're the mouse. While you think you're playing with it, it's playing with you before it devours you. It's at war with your soul (1 Peter 2:11). It's a big cat—a lion! Devouring you is on its agenda (1 Peter 5:8). Those forbidden desires you entertain lead to death (James 1:15). While seeming harmless, they enslave (John 8:34), control (Romans 3:9), and master you (Romans 6:14). You don't see it happening. Sin is deceitful, pretending to be the mouse while it's the cat (Hebrews 3:13). It's fun for a while to have a playdate with a cat, but it never ends well!

How is coveting what you don't have harming you? What will you do about it? Read Matthew 14.

15 Are You a Clogged Nozzle?

Recently, my lawn was dry, brown, and crunchy underfoot. Meanwhile, my zucchini plants were green and still producing. Why? I irrigated the zucchini daily but not my yard.

My Uncle Bill grew beautiful celery stalks for the market. He couldn't have done it without irrigation. I remember watching him almost 60 years ago walking through the celery field. He held a wire in his hand while the water was spurting out of the irrigation lines. He'd stop here and there and use the wire to clear clogged nozzles. Of course, he got very wet in the process!

Every believer is a nozzle. God expects living water to spray from you to nurture others' spiritual health and growth (John 7:38). The water represents the result of the Holy Spirit's control in your life—loving words, attitudes, and actions that benefit and build others up. If you're a nozzle through whom God works, He'll thoroughly soak you in the process. You'll have the aroma of Christ

in your life (Ephesians 5:1–2) and be dripping the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23). You can't be a hose that transports water but doesn't get wet. So, are you a clean nozzle or a clogged one? I know there's a part of you that doesn't like God's saturating influence. The devil and the world system organize to try to keep the lawn of your life dry, brown, and crunchy underfoot. That's the result of going your own way instead of God's way.

Your sinful nature continually desires independence. When you yield to its urgings, you cease following Christ to find greater "freedom" elsewhere. Soon, you rediscover that "freedom" doesn't satisfy you. It doesn't bring the full, meaningful life the straight and narrow Freedom Road does (John 10:10). Let's face it, you're a clogged nozzle at times. A wire unclogged Uncle Bill's irrigation line nozzle. Confessing and turning from your independence back to dependence on God unclogs yours (1 John 1:9).

How is God using you as a nozzle to lead others to righteousness? What tends to clog your nozzle? Read Matthew 15

16 Arming the Enemy

You've met the enemy and have armed him. It doesn't make sense, but you do it anyway. You wouldn't gift an AK-47 and a thousand rounds of ammunition to a known terrorist. It's not wise for your or anyone else's health. Yet, for example, daily you might arm an enemy of your health by ingesting way too much sugar. You're addicted to it! The unintended results are dental issues, obesity, diabetes, and a quiver full of degenerative diseases.

There are countless ways to arm an enemy and engage in self-defeating behavior. My college roommate didn't prepare until the night before the tests. Then he'd study all night. His repeated procrastination kept him from doing his best on exams. Not everyone learns from mistakes. He didn't. Sometimes, I don't either. Experience doesn't teach. Evaluated experience and corrective action do.

Vaping is a dangerous practice, but people do it anyway. Drug and alcohol abuse ensnares millions and often leads to premature death. A negative attitude repels others. It's like the smell of Limburger cheese. It limits your positive influence on earth. Feeding

fear increases worry and reinforces anxieties. Lying undermines trustworthiness. Overeating, under-sleeping, and under-exercising all damage your physical well-being. Arming these enemies often has a spiritual dimension.

You empower them when you ignore God, live independently of Him, and behave like you're the center of the universe. You pay a terrible price when you stubbornly and foolishly persist. The plight of the people of Judah is a reminder. "Her foes have become the head; her enemies prosper, because the LORD has afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions; her children have gone away, captives before the foe" (Lamentations 1:5, NIV). Enemies invariably bite the hand of those who feed them.

In what specific areas of life are you arming the enemies of your body and soul? How will you change that? Read Matthew 16.

17 Go-to Guilt Fix

YouTube videos are my go-to fix-it strategy for jobs around the house. But they're not as trustworthy for matters of the heart. I viewed a video, "How to Get Rid of Guilt Instantly." It said, "You can't undo your past mistakes, so forgive yourself for them, forget about them and move on." That's not the truth that frees you. I read comments from those who watched the video. Multitudes of people can't jettison paralyzing guilt for actions they're often too ashamed to reveal.

There's a difference between being guilty and feeling guilty. God declared the Israelites' objective guilt for not meeting His standards for living. Whether they felt guilty or not didn't matter (Numbers 5:6). Judges today declare defendants guilty whether or not they feel guilty. Convicted criminals often insist they're innocent. They don't appear to feel any guilt for their offenses. Similarly, the Israelites through most of their history didn't feel guilty enough to turn from their wrongdoing. King David was an exception. He acknowledged his sin and guilt. He called it a crushing burden (Psalm 38:4).

Like David, you must acknowledge your guilt to unload it. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9, NIV). God can justly forgive you because Jesus paid the penalty of your sins in full (1

Peter 3:18, Romans 5:6). The tonnage of your guilt lifts, and the gentle breeze of God's peace replaces it. It happens when you turn to God from living for yourself and receive His forgiveness. God's go-to guilt fix is simply taking Him at His word. He declares you righteous through your faith connection with Jesus Christ. You agree with Him. Don't hold yourself to a higher standard than He does.

How does a relationship with Jesus enable you to manage your guilt? Do you hold yourself to a higher standard than He does? Read Matthew 17.

18 Are You Good Enough for Heaven? (1)

Bill O'Brien donated more than twelve gallons of blood. He said, "When that final whistle blows and St. Peter asks, 'What did you do?' I'll just say, 'Well, I gave one hundred pints of blood.' "That ought to get me in."¹

I threw the javelin for Millersville State College. My best throw was 210 feet. Is that good? Compared to whom? In 1970 the winning throw at the Penn Relays was about 270 feet and the American record was 300 feet. Enough said! Have you ever won an award for outstanding performance? If so, how do you compare in what you do best with the best in the world?

Accurate measurements require a standard. The yard is based on the distance between two lines on a bronze bar made in 1845. The metric standard of mass is a one-kilogram solid cylinder of platinum-iridium alloy maintained at a constant temperature near Paris. Jesus' words, actions, and attitudes are God's "good" standard. You must stand back-to-back with Him and not fall short a fraction of a moral millimeter. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else.

The God who became like you must remake you so you can become like Him. Jesus' goodness is to yours what the Pacific Ocean is to a puddle. Consider three passages that describe Jesus' moral perfection. "So Jesus said, 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him'" (John 8:28–29, NIV). "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21, NIV). "For we don't have a high priest

who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin” (Hebrews 4:15, NIV). ““ He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth”” (1 Peter 2:22, NIV).

On a scale of 1-100 percent, how would you grade Jesus’ moral goodness? How would you grade your own? Read Matthew 18.

19 Are You Good Enough for Heaven? (2)

A former biology professor at Millersville State College explained to us students that we weren’t good enough to use a pen for exams. We were pencil and eraser people. In the moral realm, we write with a pen. The ink represents our words, deeds, and attitudes. We can’t erase what we write.

George Barna’s survey revealed that 83 percent of Americans believe that people are basically good.¹ We grossly underestimate God’s “right-living” requirements and overestimate our goodness. God’s moral standards are like a full-grown elephant’s foot. Our goodness is like a baby’s first socks. It’s far from a perfect fit! The Bible uses different Hebrew words to describe how we fall short of God’s moral standards.

One word for “sin” in the Bible means to cross over a boundary (Hosea 6:7). As a child you often ignored the limits your parents set. Sometimes they knew. Sometimes they didn’t. Sometimes they caught you. Sometimes they didn’t. When apprehended, sometimes they punished you. Sometimes they didn’t. You’ve bashed God’s wise and lovingly established boundaries. Heaven’s “video cameras” record every trespass. Romans 2:16 tells you that one day God will judge the secrets of every person.

The second word for sin in the Bible means “to break away from.” You’ve denied God’s right to rule over you, and you have gone your own way (1 Timothy 1:9). You don’t want anyone to tell you what to do. Not even God.

The most common word for sin in the Bible means “to miss the mark” (Romans 3:23). You’ve repeatedly missed God’s bull’s-eye of perfect love for Him and your neighbor. Only Jesus didn’t. You’ve not always loved your neighbor as yourself. According to Luke 10:30–37, your neighbor is anyone whom you’ve got the capacity and

opportunity to help. Jeremiah 17:9 (NIV) describes the core of human personality as “deceitful above all things and beyond cure.” Romans 3:10–23 teaches that no one is righteous, not even one. No one voluntarily seeks God. No one.

Do you believe you will go to heaven when you die? Why should a holy God accept you? Read Matthew 19.

20 Are You Good Enough for Heaven? (3)

Isn't it odd that 83 percent of Americans see as good the same heart Jeremiah 17:9, Isaiah 64:6, and Romans 3:10–23 describe as not good? Michael Green wrote, “The breakdown of marriage and family, the worldwide increase of torture and wanton killing, the mindless hedonism and greed, and the emptiness of belief and purpose that characterize so much of the Western world do little to support an optimistic view of human nature.”¹

To see yourself truly you must look at both your actions and motives. Often, you do “good” things for bad reasons. A desire to please and bring glory to His Heavenly Father motivated Jesus' good works. You want the glory for yourself. You want others to know about the good that you've done. Romans 3:27 and Ephesians 2:9 both assure you that no one will have anything to boast about before God.

Ms. Messer taught English at my high school. Her punctuation tests brought her students to their knees. When she detected a single mistake in a sentence, she marked the whole sentence wrong. None of her sentences were easy to punctuate! Hardly any of her students broke the 0 percent barrier on her tests.

Don't think you'll satisfy God if the paper of your life has more words spelled correctly than incorrectly. You won't! A holy, righteous God can't tolerate even one uncrossed “t.” Moral perfection is the standard. Only Jesus has it. According to James 2:10 (NIV), “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.” It's very sobering to know you don't meet God's right-living, right-talking, right-thinking, perfect paper requirement. What are you going to do?

“Maybe if I try a little harder, I can do better,” you tell yourself. Like a bee in a horizontal bottle with its base against the window, you

fly, fly, and fly some more toward the light, but never get anywhere. If you could get to heaven by your performance, why did God at tremendous personal cost send his Son to earth to die on the cross? Would not that mean Jesus suffered and died for nothing?

Do self-serving motives at times drive your most praiseworthy behavior? Do you see that as a problem? If so, what will you do about it? Read Matthew 20.

21 Are You Good Enough for Heaven? (4)

Romans 6:23 tells you that sin's penalty is death. That means spiritual separation from God. The sacrifices of the Old Testament were substitutes for the death of the sinner. Sheep, oxen, goats, and doves took his/her place. The animals had to be perfect, unblemished specimens. The one making a burnt offering placed a hand on the animal (Leviticus 1:4). Which symbolized transferring guilt. It also represented receiving the animal's innocence.

As you through faith place your hand on Jesus, the Lamb of God, He transfers your sins to Himself and His virtues to you. He died for the ungodly (Romans 5:6). Not for perfect persons but for messed up ones! You qualify! Jesus paid the penalty for your sin. He tasted death for every man (Hebrews 2:9). You must trust in the sufficiency of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. You must commit yourself to Him. When you do, you get credit for Jesus' perfect life. He takes the rap for your botched-up one. "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21, NIV). Jesus credits you with the only good that can endure the light and fire of God's judgment. You receive it when you trust in Him.

Karen Clemente was in Port Authority Bus Terminal in Times Square waiting to take a bus to Hoboken, NJ. A scruffy-looking man asked her for change for the bus. He couldn't afford the fare. As she walked toward the open door of the bus, she couldn't decide whether to help him or not. Once inside, she found the \$1.25 she needed to pay the man's fare. The driver closed the door and began pulling out of the station. She told him, "Don't leave! Let that man in. I'll pay for him."¹ What Karen did illustrates what Jesus did for all humanity.

How will this transfer of your sin to Jesus and His righteousness to you change the way you think about yourself today? Read Matthew 21.

Chapter 3

HIS MILK FOR YOUR GROWTH

Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.

1 PETER 2:2 NIV

22 What's on Your Plate?

I'm in no position to judge anyone. My portion control meter is out of order. Maybe, the mashed potato container just lies. It says it feeds five when it only feeds two! I weigh the same as I did 25 years ago. That's thanks more to my metabolism than my self-control. On the other hand, I almost never eat fast food unless that means food cooked in the microwave!

Nutritionists observe that both what we eat and how much significantly affect our health. They suggest one serving of animal protein is the size of a deck of cards. One-half cup of fruits and vegetables is as big as a computer mouse. A baked potato serving is fist-sized. There is another kind of portion control—what we do with our time. That significantly affects our spiritual health.

Life expectancy in the USA is about 80.¹ In the Philippines, it's about 69.² So, of everything you could do in those years, what's your portion? With what are you filling the plate of your life? About 3,000 years ago King David wrote, "LORD, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure" (Psalm 16:5, NIV). He also called the LORD his portion in Psalm 119:57 and 142:5. He spooned a heaping serving of God on the plate of his life. Asaph agreed, "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Psalm 73:26, NIV). Jeremiah describes the LORD as the Portion of Jacob (Jeremiah 10:16).

Think of all God could've heaped on His plate from the vast universe He created. Deuteronomy 32:9 (NIV) states that the LORD's portion is His people. Of everything God could have chosen, He chose you! That should make you feel special! Now, if you love Him, it's your turn to pile Him on your plate of time.

If God is your portion today, how will that affect what you think, say, and do? Read Matthew 22.

23 Do You Know the Two Christian Fundamentals?

Grace and gratitude are the fundamentals of the Christian faith. They sum up what Christians believe. They describe why they behave as they do. Let's first reflect on grace.

Grace is undeserved favor with a transforming purpose. Suppose I intentionally ruin the paint job on my neighbor's car. He saw me do it. He was watching me through his bedroom window. Imagine I find myself in a financial bind. I knock on his door to see if he can loan me one hundred dollars. I make my irrational request. He pulls five twenties from his wallet. He says, "I'm not going to loan you the money. I'm going to give it to you." That's grace in twenties! I won't damage his car again.

You've done untold damage to God's purposes and to other people created in His image. We all have. Nevertheless, God actively pursues blessing you through His Son, Jesus Christ (Luke 15:1-7). By God's undeserved favor through your trust in the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice on the cross in your place, He forgives your sins. He then expects you'll forgive others who have offended you (Matthew 6:14-15) and live for Jesus who died for you (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). If you're not becoming more like Jesus, you should rightly question whether you're under God's grace or His judgment.

Grace is the ultimate shapeshifter. It takes the form of your needs. God's grace fixes everything, but it functions in harmony with His sovereign will. It was on display throughout Jesus' life. Emotional, physical, and spiritual problems dissolved as grace flowed through Him.

Grace is more about fixing you than fixing your problems. Your biggest problem is the gap between your character and Jesus. Fixing you means making you more like Him (Romans 8:29). Do you need the right words to speak to someone who is hurting? Do you need the wisdom to make a crucial decision? Do you need the courage to live against the prevailing ungodly current of life? Whatever you need today consistent with God's will, His grace will supply.

HIS POWER FOR YOUR WEAKNESS

Gratitude changes how you think, feel, and behave. Gratitude springs from recognizing that God constantly gives you what you don't deserve. A Pennsylvania wrestler once volunteered to forfeit a wrestling match to an injured opponent. He did that so the injured wrestler could win his 100th career match instead of graduating from high school with ninety-nine wins. The wrestler who received that gift should have overflowed with gratitude. How much more should you do because of all God does for you?

How has your gratitude to God grown since you first believed?

Read Matthew 23.

24 Bible Study Tips

Learning to feed yourself spiritually is vital. "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation" (1 Peter 2:2, NIV). For the first dozen years, I was a Christian, my goal was to read through the Bible yearly. I read like someone chewing highly nutritious broccoli while swallowing very little of it. Please learn from my mistake. Your following Jesus requires education plus application. "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (James 1:22, NIV).

It isn't how much of the Bible you get through every year that matters most. It's how much of the Bible gets through you. "Discipleship" that's biblical information without transformation isn't discipleship.

Beginning in December 1981, I read less but tried to apply something every day from what I read. Now it takes me three years to read through the Bible at a one-chapter-a-day rate. I write down the date, what I read, and in one or two sentences something that speaks to my heart. I usually write as though God is speaking directly to me. Here are seven examples:

12/10/15 - 1 Samuel 22 - Lying to protect yourself often puts others in danger. Speak the truth in love.

12/11/15 - 1 Samuel 23 - I am the God of all possibilities. Trust how I am working in and through you and find your strength in Me.

12/12/15 - 1 Samuel 24-25 - Following the voices of your anger and pride will lead you astray. Don't make knee-jerk decisions when you are hurting.

12/13/15 - 1 Samuel 26 - Repentance is first recognizing you've acted like a fool and erred greatly and then turning from your foolishness and error.

12/14/15 - 1 Samuel 27-28 - If you refuse to obey Me, don't expect Me to guide you.

12/15/15 - 1 Samuel 29 - My sovereign will is the needle that pulls the thread of your life through all circumstances' ups and downs.

12/16/15 - 1 Samuel 30 - Find strength in Me to overcome adversity (v. 6).

I've used the Life Application Study Bible for my reading for more than thirty-five years. I highly recommend it. When nothing from the chapter itself speaks to my heart, the Life Application Study Bible's notes usually do. Writing down what you hear God say to you helps Velcro the truth to your heart.

If you aren't already, when will you begin recording your devotional thoughts? Read Matthew 24.

25 Twelve Suggestions to Get More from Your Bible Reading

1. Some versions of the Bible are easier to understand than others. The King James Version is at grade 12 reading level. The New International Version is 7–8. The NIV is the most popular English version. The New Living Translation is grade 6 reading level. The NLT is the second most popular English version. Only Scripture you understand and apply will make you more like Jesus.

2. Consider purchasing a study Bible. It'll help you digest more soul food. I've used the Life Application Study Bible for more than 30 years. It's the best-selling study Bible. It's now in its third edition.

3. An online concordance deepens your study. You can search biblical words at BibleGateway.com: A searchable online Bible in over 150 versions and fifty languages. For example, you can study every occurrence of "love" in the Bible. That helps you get a firmer grip on its meaning. A Bible dictionary provides historical and cultural backgrounds. It explains Bible people, places, things, books, and customs. You can access a free online version at Bible Dictionary - Online Dictionaries (biblestudytools.com).

HIS POWER FOR YOUR WEAKNESS

4. Let the Bible explain itself. Matthew 7:7–8 doesn't guarantee you will get everything you ask from God. Other passages, such as James 4:3, describe conditions for answered prayer. Interpret a verse based on the whole Bible's teaching about the topic.

5. Consider literary forms. Jesus is the door (John 10:9). But don't expect a knob and hinges. A literary interpretation considers, for example, whether the verses are prose or poetry.

6. Look for only one meaning for a verse (the original intention of the author), but many applications.

7. Understanding the grammar of the original languages and historical background helps you grasp the author's original intention. For that, we depend on experts in biblical languages and culture.

8. Interpret unclear passages in the light of clear ones. Ephesians 2:8–10 describes how good deeds relate to salvation better than James 2:24 does.

9. Research what words meant to the biblical authors. Two resources to help: Nelson's Expository Dictionary of the Old Testament by Merrill F. Unger and Williams White, Jr. and An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words by W. E. Vine - Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words (studybible.info).

10. Proverbs express general principles, not moral absolutes. Proverbs 3:16 promises long life to the wise. But some wise people die young.

11. Parables teach one main point. Luke 15 teaches that God cares about lost people. Don't look for meaning in all the details.

12. Pray for the Holy Spirit to lead you into all truth (John 14:17, 26).

Which of the twelve principles is most helpful? Read Matthew 25.

26 A Time and Place for Discipline

I'm not the poster guy for discipline. However, I've observed my personal devotions are most consistent if I have a specific time and place for them. Discipline is like water, sunshine, and fertilizer for a plant. It enables you to achieve your full physical, emotional, spiritual, mental, and social potential. It's the superstructure on which you

build your life. Without it, you'll make less of a difference on earth than with it. Allow me to share personal examples.

I daily read the Bible while eating breakfast. I pray while doing my stretching exercises. I eat three times a day and not in between meals (except for evening ice cream!). I have regular places and times to do strength-building exercises. Without a time and place for each of these, I'd not do them regularly. Do I ever miss? Of course! When I do, it's usually because I've allowed something else to usurp the reserved time or place.

Discipline is the backbone of following Jesus. Obedience requires it. Like saying no to the second muffin at a meal, you must continually say no to the world's attempts to shape how you think and live. You must also continually say yes to God's will and ways. Frankly, I don't enjoy discipline one bit! I'm guessing you don't either! "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:11, NIV). Discipline enables God to shape you to become more like Jesus—but only if you give it a time and place!

What are your designated times and places to read the Bible and to pray? If you don't yet have them, when will they be? Read Matthew 26.

27 Daily Time with God

To be physically healthy and fit you must eat healthy food and do regular cardiovascular and muscle-strengthening exercises. To maintain your weight, calories burned must balance with calories consumed. Experts recommend you eat a variety of fruits and vegetables and limit your consumption of red meat.

Spiritual health and fitness also depend on healthy food and regular exercise. God's word is your soul's super healthy Mediterranean diet. Applying it is your spiritual exercise. Daily read it and think about how it relates to you. Then apply it to boost your spiritual vitality. Reading without application it's like chewing without swallowing. Life application builds spiritual muscles. The Bible calls it obedience.

David prayed every morning (Psalm 5:3) and sought God's face (Psalm 27:8). Psalm 27:9 describes the opposite of seeking God's face

as hiding your face, turning away in anger from, rejecting, or forsaking God.

Daily seek God as earnestly as you would iced water in 110-degree heat (Psalm 63:1). Seek Him with all your heart and soul, and you'll find Him (Deuteronomy 4:29). He will bless you (Psalm 119:2).

Daily time with God prepares you to bear spiritual fruit. To bear fruit a grape branch must remain attached to the vine. To be spiritually fruitful, you must maintain vital contact with Jesus (John 15:5). Set aside time daily for prayer and Bible reading when you're most alert in a place you can meet with God without interruption (Mark 1:35).

Read daily at least a chapter of Scripture starting with the New Testament. A study Bible such as *The Life Application Bible* helps you understand its background, meaning, and application. Write the date, what Scripture you read, and 1–3 sentences of personal application. Talk to God about all that concerns you (Philippians 4:6–7). *Read Matthew 27.*

28 Are You a Growing Christian?

At 25, you wouldn't recognize yourself at 85! Aging erodes your vision, hearing, taste, and smell. Hair goes gray and/or away. Wrinkles appear uninvited. Trips to the bathroom increase. Balance problems emerge. Walking speed eventually downshifts to turtle gear.

Paul acknowledges physical decline. But he sees another reality in believers. "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16, NIV). You might not do fifty pushups in your golden years, but your spiritual health can be fit, and vital. Unfortunately, not all senior believers are senior saints. Too many grow old without growing up spiritually.

The spiritual life Jesus gives you (Ephesians 2:5) grows, matures, and bears much fruit if the environment is suitable. You're responsible for the environment. Crops need light, carbon dioxide, water, and nutrients. Only God can make them grow. Farmers don't take vacations during the growing season. Spiritual fruitfulness also requires work. "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow" (1 Corinthians 3:6, NIV). You can't afford to

take vacations from spiritual disciplines and expect to be a growing Christian.

Spiritual growth reveals itself in developing character, knowledge, and skills. Growing Christians become more like Jesus as they spend time in prayer and His word. Others can readily observe the fruit of the Spirit in them—Jesus’ love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23). This transformation starts with a renewed way of thinking (Romans 12:2), which takes discipline and time to develop. Growing Christians become increasingly skilled in godly living. “But solid [spiritual] food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil” (Hebrews 5:14, NIV). The bottom line is that spiritual growth requires effort!

What time and energy are you investing in your daily spiritual development? What fruit have you seen from your investment? Read Matthew 28.

29 Feeding Yourself Spiritually (1)

Disease-causing organisms are everywhere. They thrive in an unclean world. If they invade your body, they can multiply quickly. They can create a life-and-death situation. The best defense against them is clean food, clean water, and a clean body. No matter how careful you are, germs will enter. In a healthy body, antibodies quickly overcome them. Adequate rest, balanced meals, and regular exercise help the antibodies contain and destroy the invaders. When the invaders outnumber or overpower your immune system, you experience discomfort, pain, fever, and sickness.

Pro-Christ and anti-Christ forces battle for your soul. Like disease-causing organisms, evil powers surround you and seek to invade your life. They seek to pounce and kill when you’re most vulnerable. Continual cleansing is your first-line defense.

You need not collapse under their attack. If your soul is rested, well-fed, and properly exercised, it’s much easier to fight the invader. When you cheat on your sleep, skip meals, and neglect exercise, you’re aiding the disease organisms that threaten you.

When you ignore the feeding and exercise of your soul, you’re playing into the hands of anti-Christ forces. You love and obey God when you spend time with Him reading His word and praying. It’s

easy to wallow passively in other people's spirituality. It's hard to spend the time needed for first-hand experience. Other people's spirituality benefits you no more than their food.

Paul instructs us, "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" (Colossians 3:16, NIV).

Many verses describe the benefits of God's word: cleansing (Psalm 119, John 15:3); delight (Psalm 119:16); life (1 Peter 1:23); strength (Psalm 119:25); hope (Psalm 119:81); direction (Psalm 119:105); understanding (Psalm 119:130); stability (Matthew 24:35); and sanctification (John 17:17). In addition, God's word builds you up (Acts 20:32) and teaches you the truth (Ephesians 1:13). It seems foolish to neglect it, doesn't it?

How does neglecting God's word hurt you? Read Mark 1.

30 Feeding Yourself Spiritually (2)

Advertisers entice you to spend money for products without one percent of the Bible's intrinsic worth. You buy things that'll rust out or wear out. What time do you spend on that which abides forever?

God's word, like a mirror, shows you your spiritual acne. If you think your spiritual life is fine just as it is, you haven't been looking in that mirror. A sheep in summer appears to be white. Seen against the background of the new-fallen snow, it no longer looks white. If you judge yourself against other selected people, you may feel virtuous. If you judge yourself against Jesus, the verdict is far different.

God gives His word to transform your life. Romans 12:2 (NIV) says, "Don't 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." You need a transformed mind to do God's will. This reveals why daily time with God is such a struggle.

There's a colossal battle for your mind between the forces of Christ and those of anti-Christ. It's won or lost according to who controls input. Spiritual output is dependent on spiritual input. Thistle seeds don't produce apple trees. Worldly thinking doesn't produce spiritual fruit.

Apart from choosing to channel God's word into your mind, you'll conform to world thinking as surely as night follows day. Furthermore, you'll think you're a fine, church-attending pillar of the community. You'll think just like the non-Christian world does.

Filling your mind with God's word is an ongoing battle – Satan resists your efforts because he knows that's how God renews your mind. Your sinful nature isn't a fan of God's word either. Spending quiet time with God might seem unproductive. Usually, the problem is your priorities. You are available for the things you really want to do, right?

*When is the best time each day for you to spend time with God?
Read Mark 2.*

31 Feeding Yourself Spiritually (3)

How can you feed yourself spiritually? If you're just starting, begin with six or seven minutes/day reading the Bible. Add three or four minutes of praying. Soon, you'll want to spend more time. It's best to choose the same regular, quiet place to commune with God. Mine is the kitchen table. Go to that place when your mind is sharpest. For me, that's early in the morning.

Time with God includes reading and digesting His word. To it, add talking with Him about all that concerns you (Philippians 4:6–7). Try to apply at least one truth each day. Ask what God's word is saying about your relationships with Him and others. How do your habits, work, witness, finances, and ministry need to change?

One day I was reading Jeremiah 45. In v. 5 (NIV) God told Baruch, Jeremiah's secretary, "Should you then seek great things for yourself? Don't seek them." God reminded me that a servant doesn't seek wonderful things for himself. My prayer time began with confessing my spotlight-seeking nature. I asked God to renew my desire to serve Him and others humbly.

A study Bible helps me understand what I'm reading. It aids me in applying it to my life. I've used a Life Application Bible for my devotional reading for more than 30 years. The first time through it, I read the Scripture and all the notes. Now I read the notes if nothing jumps out of the chapter I read for the day. That's more common when I'm reading the Old Testament than the New Testament. I

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write down on a piece of paper in 1–3 sentences what stood out for me. I attempt to write at least one personal application.

You're not automatically a fruitful Christian just because you spend time with God every day. But you limit your fruitfulness if you don't. God uses your time with Him to renew your mind and make you more like Jesus. Personal time with God may seem burdensome in the beginning. Stick with it. The joy comes slowly in trickles. There's no substitute for a first-hand spiritual experience with God. There's no easy, quick way to become like Jesus.

What is the best place for you to spend daily time with God? Do you have a study Bible that will help you understand it? Read Mark 3.

Chapter 4

HIS TEACHING FOR YOUR TRAINING

But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

HEBREWS 5:14

32 The Mysterious Number Three

Three is a mysterious number. Discipleship originates from the incomprehensible 3-D Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father sent the Son to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). The Son sent His followers (John 20:21). He commissioned them to make disciples worldwide. He promised His presence during the process (Matthew 28:18–20). The Holy Spirit provides the resources to complete the job (Acts 1:8).

The goal is to make people all over the world like Jesus (Romans 8:29). Jesus Himself is like the Father (John 14:9) and the Holy Spirit (John 14:16). The fruit of the Spirit consists of Jesus-like characteristics (Galatians 5:22–23). Discipleship starts with God. It shapes us to be like Jesus while retaining our uniqueness.

Tiffany stamps its jewelry with the Tiffany and Co. mark. God stamps every disciple with the 3-D faith, hope, and love mark (1 Corinthians 13:13). It identifies authentic followers of Jesus. Disciples trust God. That's faith. They confidently expect He'll do everything He promises. That's hope. They sacrifice their time, talents, money, and energy for Him and others. That's love. Faith and hope are temporary. But love endures forever. The three fuel the discipleship journey like liquid hydrogen powers a rocket.

The goals of discipleship are 3-D—to draw people to Jesus, disciple them and deploy them in ministry. Jesus multiplied workers for the discipleship task. So should we. The best way to draw people to Jesus is to love them sacrificially. We meet their needs. Once they come to faith, the next step is telling and showing them how to live as Jesus did. We copy Jesus. They copy what's like Jesus in us.

Eventually, they become independently dependent on Jesus. Then others can copy what's like Jesus in them.

Discipleship's field of operation is 3-D—local, region, and world. That's the pattern in the Great Commission—beginning in Jerusalem (local), on to Judea and Samaria (region), and then to the ends of the world (Matthew 28:18–20). Discipleship starts in our own family and community. Our communities need to hear the good news and see us and our church live it. Salespeople who love their products make the most sales. Our product is a life-changing relationship with the Lord of the universe. That's something to get excited about! Three is a mysterious number!

How obvious is it that you're excited about a life-changing relationship with the Lord of the universe? Read Mark 4.

33 The Year of the Lie

Misinformation is untruth, whether deliberate or not.

Disinformation is deliberate misinformation. In 2020, life dumped both upon you. Guess what! Every year is the year of the lie. 2020 was nothing special in that regard.

Disinformation began when the serpent (Satan) contradicted God's promise. God said eating from the tree in the middle of the garden would surely bring death. The serpent said, "You will not certainly die" (Genesis 3:4). He's further described in John 8:44, NIV: "You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies."

The world system is Satan's organized, multi-faceted, extraordinarily successful plan. He uses it to dethrone God from the center of everyday life. That, for example, is why God is notably absent from daily news reports. Lying politicians don't issue the most damaging disinformation. These deceivers are themselves deceived. They're living a self-centered existence in a God-centered universe. The worst deception is the sophisticated attempt to deceive you concerning Jesus' identity and mission. The deception also relates to your own identity and mission when you believe in Him. Studying and applying God's word is a life jacket that keeps you from

drowning in a hurricane-driven sea of disinformation. Are you wearing it?

How is your daily Scripture reading like a life jacket that keeps you afloat in a raging sea of lies? Read Mark 5.

34 Your Spiritual Vital Signs

Your doctor assesses your heartbeat, breathing rate, temperature, and blood pressure. Jesus assesses your belief, obedience, and love. They're like three strands of a braided rope. 1 John (NIV) reveals their interconnectedness.

“We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands” (1 John 2:3). “And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us” (1 John 3:23). “Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them...” (1 John 3:24a). “And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother” (1 John 4:21). “This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3).

Belief, obedience, and love grow and intertwine throughout your life as a believer. You keep on believing, keep on loving and keep on obeying. The vault of time contains yesterday's obedience, love, and belief. Today's opportunities to serve God and others require a fresh flow of all three.

When your vital signs indicate all isn't well, your doctor prescribes a treatment plan. Fever suggests an infection that needs attention. High blood pressure might require medication. Your spiritual vital signs of belief, obedience, and love are relationship terms. You believe, obey, and love someone.

God's grace and your effort keep the three strands growing and intertwining. You work out your salvation with fear and trembling. God works in you to provide the will and ability to follow His ways (Philippians 2:12–13). He works in you. His Spirit lives through you. You obey God because you love Him (John 14:15).

Your belief, obedience, and love are still developing. They're not what they'll someday be. But they're significant steering forces in your life. Belief, obedience, and love are gradually replacing fear, doubt, rebellion, and apathy.

List specific ways your belief, obedience, and love have grown since you became a believer. What are you doing to provide an atmosphere that keeps them growing? Read Mark 6.

35 Christian Meditation

Stop...Look...Listen! Do you read the Bible like an ambulance racing toward an accident scene? Do you zoom past potentially life-changing verses like guard rails at 100 mph? Do you read about peace in John 14:27 and love in 1 Corinthians 13 at breakneck speed? Do you slow down enough for peace and love to possess you? Do you allow them to shape you?

Meditation is deliberately pondering your ways and God's ways. It's reflective thinking about yourself and Scripture so you can adjust your life to honor God. The goal is intimacy with God and conformity to His ways.

Through meditation, you pull from the garden of your life the choking weeds of worldly ways of thinking and acting. When I first trusted in Christ, getting was more important than giving, speaking than listening, and others serving me than my serving them. I thought these traits were adorable yellow flowers. God's word identified them as dandelions He wants to uproot!

To meditate, seek a quiet place where you can be alone. Focus on your loving Creator, Lord, and Redeemer and all He has done for you. Study and meditate on the Scriptures. They're useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). God's word does it all. Meditating on and obeying it makes you wiser than your enemies (Psalm 119:98), prosperous, and successful (Joshua 1:8).

Meditation could include praying verses into your life. For example, a prayer based on 1 Peter 5:7: "Lord, You know how much I fear telling others what You mean to me. I worry too much about what they might think and too little about what You think. I know You care for me despite my "lockjaw." I'm rolling my fears and anxieties onto You right now. I don't want them back. Fill me with boldness and courage. I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen."

Meditation drills spiritual wells into God's word. It pumps up its healing waters to bless you and others. In it you find forgiveness and

purification for your sins (1 John 1:9). You experience comfort in your troubles (2 Corinthians 1:4). You feel inward renewal despite outward wasting away (2 Corinthians 4:16). Your weakness makes God's power perfect (2 Corinthians 12:9). Stop...Look...Listen!

Concerning meditation, what's the next step for you? Read Mark 7.

36 Scripture Memory

People have told me they can't memorize Scripture. I'll be upfront. For years I didn't want to put forth the necessary effort. When I was a new Christian, I memorized seventy-five verses in the Navigators' Topical Memory System. Years passed. I forgot them. Without review, memorized Scripture leaks. The recipe for Scripture memorization is one teaspoon of challenging work and ten teaspoons of persistent REVIEW, REVIEW, REVIEW!

Dr. Waylon Moore developed a list of one hundred verses to memorize. It took me five years to learn them. It wasn't easy. I added the verses to memorize in 31 Steps Toward Spiritual Maturity to his list. I review about seven verses daily while I'm eating breakfast. It takes three weeks to review the following list. Then I begin again.

Scripture memory will add fuel injection to your spiritual life. The following verses make a much greater impact on me now than they used to. I challenge you to learn them and continue to review them. My three-week review cycle follows:

Week 1 – Sunday - Mt 4:4, Heb 4:12, Jer 15:16, Jn 16:24, Mt 21:22, Phil 4:6–7, Rom 12:1. Monday – Jn 14:21, Heb 5:8, Mt 4:19, Acts 1:8, Mt 28:19–20, Rom 3:23, Rom 6:23. Tuesday – Heb 9:27, Rom 5:8, Eph 2:8–9, Jn 5:24, Jn 1:12, Rev 3:20, 1 Jn 5:13. Wednesday – Jn 5:24, Jas 1:5, Isa 30:18, Prov 3:5–6, 1 Cor 10:13, Rom 8:37, Jn 3:30. Thursday – Gal 2:20, 2 Cor 5:15, 1 Cor 6:19–20, Jn 14:26, Jn 4:23, Psa 103:13–14, Jn 3:16. Friday – Jer 31:3, Isa 49:15–16, Heb 13:5, Isa 26:3, Jn 14:2–3, Rom 8:32, Phil 4:19. Saturday – Luke 6:38, Psa 62:11, Mt 11:28–30, Psa 147:3–5, 1 Chron 29:11–12, Jn 1:14.

Week 2 – Sunday – Dt 6:6–7, Gen 22:18, Isa 59:21, Ecc 10:1, Ecc 8:11, 1 Sam 15:22–23. Monday – Prov 17:27–28, Rom 4:17b, 20–21, Lk 9:23, Jn 8:31, Isa 32:17, Col 2:6–7. Tuesday - Psa 1, Psa 23, Psa 84:11, Psa 62:5, Psa 27:14, Isa 40:31, 2 Pet 3:14, 1 Thess 4:15–16, Rev 20:15. Wednesday – Psa 61:2, Isa 63:9, Psa 18:1–2, Psa 46:1,10, Isa

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26:3, Jn 13:13–14, Phil 2:3–4, Prov 13:10, Col 3:23–24. Thursday – Phil 4:13, 2 Cor 12:9, Heb 4:15–16, 2 Pet 1:2–3, 2 Cor 9:8, 1 Cor 1:9, 2 Thess 3:3, Heb 1:9, Phil 4:8. Friday – Psa 27:4,8, Psa 107:9, Isa 43:4, Dt 1:11, Gal 6:7. Saturday – 1 Chron 16:10–12, Heb 11:6, Eph 4:29, Jas 1:19–20, Heb 10:38.

Week 3 – Sunday – Jn 15:5, Heb 10:25, Col 1:18, Jn 14:15.

Monday – 1 Pet 2:2, Psa 119:9, 11, Eph 5:18, Gal 5:22–23. Tuesday – 1 Jn 2:16, Eph 10:11–12, Prov 3:34, 1 Cor 6:12. Wednesday – Psa 119:15–16, Mt 22:37–39, Jn 4:24, 1 Cor 10:14. Thursday – 1 Cor 11:26, Jn 15:8, Rom 1:16. Friday – 1 Tim 2:2, Rom 12:11, 1 Cor 12:7. Saturday – Isa 64:8, 1 Cor 4:2, Jn 13:34–35.

Memorize Matthew 4:4—Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” (NIV) Read Mark 8.

37 Sharing Your Faith

Jesus’ followers fish for people (Matthew 4:19). Timing is critical to fishing. When people feel stressed, they’re more receptive to the gospel.

It’s best to move from small talk to God talk privately. Don’t project an “I’m better than you are” attitude. You’re not. You’re one beggar telling another where to find food.

Two questions can help bridge the conversation to spiritual things. The first is for people facing tough times. Ask, “Do you feel a need to be closer to God?” If the answer is “Yes,” say, “Let me show you how you can be.” Then share “How to Become Jesus’ Follower.”

Another question is, “What’s the best thing that ever happened to you?” Listen attentively. Then ask if you may share your best thing. Share in about 1 minute what your life was like before receiving Jesus as your Forgiver and Leader. A second minute about what you did to receive Him. A third minute about why it’s the best thing that’s happened to you. Think about your story and write it down before you share it with others. After sharing it, ask: Have you made the wonderful discovery of knowing God personally? Would you like to? If “Yes,” you can review “How to Become Jesus’ Follower.”

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How to Become Jesus' Follower

The first thing to know is that you're a sinner. Romans 3:23 says that we're all sinners and have fallen short of God's glory, which is His infinite perfection in all He does and is. In other words, we can't stand back-to-back with Jesus and exactly measure up to His moral and spiritual height. That's a big deal. Romans 6:23 says the penalty for not measuring up to that standard is death. We have a problem.

The second thing to know is Jesus died on the cross in your place (Romans 5:8). God showered His unmerited favor upon you, doing more than you could expect. God, in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, took your place and paid your death penalty (1 Corinthians 15:3–4). He was buried and rose from the dead. His resurrection proved that God is satisfied with His payment on your behalf. God can justly forgive you. Jesus paid your penalty in full. The innocent One took the place of the guilty.

The first thing to do is to turn from living life according to your own values, priorities, and agenda. The U-turn to go God's way is what the Bible calls repentance. Repentance is acknowledging that you've been going in the wrong direction and now want to go in the right direction. In Mark 1:15 Jesus commands you to repent and believe the good news (that He died in your place on the cross, was buried, and rose from the dead).

The second thing to do is to open the door of your life to Jesus. Invite Him to come in and take the driver's seat of your life. He promises that if you open the door, He will come in (Revelation 3:20). He keeps His promises. When you receive Him into your life, you become God's child (John 1:12).

You can open the door to Him by the following prayer which has no magic words but merely expresses the attitude of a heart that is willing to go God's way.

Lord Jesus, Thank you for dying on the cross in my place and taking my sin, death, and judgment upon Yourself. I open the door of my life to You. I want You to come into my life and take control. Turn on the light and clean up the mess. I thank You for forgiving my sins and making me a child of God. I want to be like You. Amen.

Master the "How to Become Jesus' Follower" Gospel presentation so you'll be prepared to share it. Read Mark 9.

38 Dying to Live

Effective life strategies can seem contrary to common sense. One might think throwing a shot put, discus or javelin as far as possible takes all-out muscular effort. The truth is the best throwers are very relaxed. I helped my Uncle Bill plant celery. We occupied the two seats on his celery planter. It was slowly moving through the field. We both had a handful of celery plants in our left hands. We placed them one at a time in designated slots connected to a rotating wheel. Uncle Bill did it better than I did. I was hurrying to do the job. Uncle Bill, a seasoned veteran, told me that to go faster, I had to relax more. He was right.

James Calvert and other missionaries dedicated themselves to sharing the gospel in the Fiji Islands where cannibals lived. When they arrived, the ship's captain tried to discourage them. He predicted that they'd lose their lives. Calvert replied, "We died before we came here."¹ They had died to self-centered living. They were living for Jesus who died for them and was raised again (2 Corinthians 5:15). That's precisely what Jesus told them and us to do.

That one must die to live is contrary to common sense. The last thing we want to do is die. Dying to selfish living is the first thing we need to do to experience a purposeful life. Every Christian who bears much fruit has died to self-centered living. "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" (John 12:24, NIV).

Joy doesn't come from living extravagantly. It blossoms when we die to self-centered living for the benefit of God and others. The most satisfying moments of my life are when I influence others' lives for Jesus. We must continually renew our commitment to die to self-centered living and live for God's purposes. Paul wrote that he died daily (1 Corinthians 15:31).

Yesterday's sacrifices are no substitute for today's. Love that sacrifices for others produces joy. You can't freeze, can, or dry joy. You must harvest it fresh every day. It's a predictable by-product of yielding to the control of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22). He produces the fruit of joy. But you have to die to get it!

How has dying to your own desires and agenda brought more joy than living for yourself? Read Mark 10.

39 1-2-3-4 Discipleship Challenge

You find comfort in the familiar. You resist changing your daily routines despite good reasons to do so. Habits can enrich your life—brushing your teeth, bathing, and eating healthy foods. Other habits entrap you like a fly struggling in a spider web. It's wise to increase vitality-strengthening habits and eliminate vitality-draining ones. The most difficult step in forming a beneficial habit is the first one.

Nothing will benefit you more than developing habits that nurture your spiritual growth. Especially for those who are new to or young in their walk with Jesus, I'm suggesting the 1-2-3-4 Discipleship Challenge. For those more mature in the faith, I suggest ABC Discipleship at: (<https://www.christiangrowthresources.com/abc-discipleship>). Back to the 1-2-3-4 Discipleship Challenge.

The 1 represents reading one chapter a day from the Bible beginning with Matthew in the New Testament in a version you can understand. I use the New International Version. Write down in 1 sentence something you can apply to your life from what you've read (you may write more if you want!). A study Bible helps. I use the Life Application Bible. This will over time help you understand God's truth more clearly in a world where lies abound (2 Timothy 2:15).

The 2 represents using your energy, time, talents, or money to bless at least two people every day. It may take the form of a phone call, meeting a need, writing an encouragement note, sending a card, working in a food bank, providing a meal, and sharing spiritual insight. The possibilities are endless. Demonstrate God's love in at least two practical ways every day (1 Peter 3:9).

The 3 represents three minutes of reflection on the one chapter you read. It might include reading the notes on the chapter in a study Bible. Think about how the chapter touches you before you write down your one application sentence.

The 4 represents spending at least four minutes in prayer daily praising God for whom He is (Psalm 150), confessing any sin and claiming His forgiveness (1 John 1:9), thanking Him for specific blessings in your life (1 Thessalonians 5:18), and making requests to Him (Philippians 4:6–7). That's the 1-2-3-4 Discipleship Challenge. The next step is up to you!

Who can hold you accountable to work through the 1-2-3-4 Discipleship Challenge? Read Mark 11.

40 ABC Discipleship

Whom you follow defines you. Following Jesus can be like pea-soup fog on an unfamiliar country road with no GPS or roadmap. It shouldn't be. In theory, it's like pressing the easy button.

Discipleship is simply becoming more like Jesus and helping others do the same. That's it! But turning theory into reality is the hardest of life's assignments. It requires denying yourself (Luke 9:23) and living for the one who died for you (2 Corinthians 5:15). That's as unpopular as a presidential candidate whose big idea is raising the Federal Income Tax rate to 100 percent! Jesus is raising the self-denial rate to 100 percent in your life. He doesn't have a Plan B.

ABC Discipleship can empower your discipleship journey. Hopefully, you don't think discipleship is only for the spiritual elite. If you believe in Jesus but want to live your life as you choose, you should read Luke 9:23 three times and think hard about what it says. There's no room in God's kingdom for "believers" who aren't following Jesus. Learning to follow Him is a process. But thinking that following Him is optional is "stinking thinking." Saving faith in Jesus changes character and conduct as you follow Him (1 Corinthians 6:9–11).

ABC Discipleship summarizes a path I've learned during fifty years of following Jesus. Applying it will help you fulfill your purpose. Following Jesus is a never-ending process of wisely building your life upon the Rock (Matthew 7:24–27). It's more doing than knowing.

You can introduce it to others who can share it as well in an ever-widening circle of Kingdom-advancing life-shaping. If you already spend time with God daily...

I invite you to check out ABC Discipleship by checking out ABC Discipleship at <https://www.christiangrowthresources.com>. Read Mark 12.

41 Spiritual Journey Tracker

Check each statement that's true of you and work on the ones that aren't.

- I have the assurance of salvation.
 - I know how to deal with sin in my life.
 - I've been baptized.
 - I read the Scriptures and pray daily.
 - I regularly participate in small group meetings.
 - I look forward to worshipping with my church family regularly.
 - I'm filled with the Holy Spirit.
 - I show evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in my life.
 - I demonstrate love for God and others by self-sacrificial service.
 - I pray regularly for the salvation of unsaved friends and relatives.
 - I forgive those who have hurt me.
 - I've joined a local church.
 - I feel a deep need for God's grace daily.
 - I serve God out of gratitude.
 - I generously and cheerfully spend my time, talents, and treasures for God.
 - I help meet the needs of the poor.
 - I speak the truth with love.
 - I've shared my personal faith story with a non-Christian.
 - I've read the entire New Testament.
 - I've led another person to faith in Christ.
 - I've followed up with a brand-new believer.
 - I've read the entire Old Testament.
 - I minister to others based on my passion, temperament, spiritual gifts, and skills.
 - I help others become more like Jesus.
- Begin working on one of the items you weren't able to check.
Read Mark 13.*

Chapter 5

HIS EAR FOR YOUR PRAYERS

Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live.

PSALM 116:2 NIV

42 Communicating with God

Deists believe God reveals Himself only through creation. They believe that natural laws have regulated everything since the beginning. God doesn't intervene. Miracles don't happen. They think reading the Bible and praying are useless activities. By contrast, Christians believe God communicates with humans through the Bible. Humans communicate with Him through prayer.

Furthermore, Christians believe Jesus Christ is God's ultimate, supernatural intervention in human affairs. He's the clearest revelation of who God is. He shows what God values. He reveals how humankind can have a relationship with Him. Jesus said, "Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own" (John 7:17, NIV). The New Testament records that teaching. Wanting to do God's will precedes knowing that Jesus' words are God's speaking to you.

The phone represents prayer. You can speed-dial God whenever and wherever you want. About whatever you want. You don't need a pin number to begin a conversation with Him. It doesn't have to be a 911 situation. He cherishes His children calling just to say, "I love you!" You make Him happy when you say, "Thank you for what you did for me today!"

You can guess how God communicates with you. Texting! In fact, He has texted you the answers to your most pressing questions. Before you even asked the questions! Communication is the lifeblood of relationships. I challenge you to spend at least 10 minutes each day calling home. Tell your Heavenly Father you love Him. Talk with Him about whatever is on your heart. You'll be reading His texts consistently as you read the New Testament.

How is developing your relationship with God like developing a relationship with a friend? Read Mark 14.

43 Balanced Prayer

Balanced prayer is about becoming more like Jesus more than convincing God to give you what you want (Romans 8:29). The acrostic PRAYER helps you develop a balanced prayer life. It represents Praise, Rely, Admit, Yield, Expressing thanks, and Request.

Praise - Praise is words or deeds that honor and exalt God for who He is and what He has done. Knowledge of both comes from the Bible. Like a gushing geyser launched by gratitude, His praise should always be on your lips (Psalm 34:1).

Rely – You rely upon Jesus, His teachings, and His finished work on the cross. You believe God no matter what. Prayer without faith won't please God (Hebrews 11:6). Trust in Jesus to do what is best more than in your wisdom to ask for what's best. If you don't get what you ask for, it'll be something better.

Admit - When you confess your sins, God promises to forgive them and purify you from unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Confessing the un-Jesus-like aspects of your behavior and making restitution to those you've hurt, are parts of the becoming like Jesus process.

Yield - Prayer demonstrates your dependence on God. He knows what's best for you. You don't. You must surrender to Him and His purposes for your life. God opposes those who proudly insist on their own way (James 4:6).

Express Thanks - One of the best measuring sticks of spiritual maturity is your gratitude to God for all He has done for you. Enter God's presence with thanksgiving (Psalm 100:4). Thank Him for His goodness (Psalm 106:1). Thank Him for everything (Ephesians 5:20) and in all circumstances (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

Request - God's Spirit guides your wisest requests for yourself and others. The wisdom to ask for what you really need comes from God (James 1:5).

In which of the six dimensions of prayer are you weakest? What will you do to strengthen that area? Read Mark 15.

44 Will God Speak to Me?

Through the written word I'm speaking to you now. If you consistently work through this resource, you'll understand over time what I value and how I think. Similarly, if you consistently read the Bible and want to do what God says, over time you'll know much more about how He thinks and what He values. Unlike my words, God's word is "alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12, NIV). Fourteen times in the New Testament, Jesus said "Whoever has ears, let them hear." The issue is not whether God will speak to you but whether you'll listen and obey when He does.

People think they've outgrown the old-fashioned guidance of the Christian faith. It's so yesterday and no longer relevant. They reject any notion that God speaks in every age through His unchanging word. They don't listen or obey when God speaks through it. They unknowingly repeat the age-old pattern of intentional deafness that characterized the children of Israel. "But they didn't listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts..." (Jeremiah 7:24, NIV).

God sometimes speaks to me through persistent impressions. When I was twenty-one, He spoke to my heart. He wanted me to channel my life into full-time Christian service. It wasn't that I didn't hear what He was saying. I did. I thought I had a better idea. Intermittently, over the following five years, He spoke. He continued to point me in that direction while I resisted. I finally gave in so I could have peace. The problem was that while He was speaking, I was unwilling to obey. Obedience is often a struggle.

God will speak to you today through His word. He blesses you when you obey Him and makes you a blessing to others. Read Mark 16.

45 Not So Crazy Dream

I once dreamed someone assigned me to do a short devotional. He told me one hour before I had to do it. I thought that was extremely short notice. I was to focus on a specific topic. Here is where the dream got crazy. An extremely soft-spoken woman was

sitting on my left. She told me the topic I was to address. The background noise in the room was a rock concert loud. I kept telling her I couldn't hear a word she was saying. But she didn't speak any louder. She attempted to communicate the message at least four times. I had absolutely no idea what she said. After that, another task distracted me for a time. Later, a man asked me whether I remembered my assignment. When I looked at the clock, I noticed I was already three minutes late. I didn't even know where I was supposed to do the devotional. On the surface, that's a crazy dream.

The morning after the dream I realized it wasn't so crazy. It's like life. The unimportant distracts you. You neglect to do the good works God lays before you (Ephesians 2:10). Further, the details of what you're supposed to do often aren't at all clear. God speaks softly through His word, circumstances, and other people. But the background noise of the "worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things" (Mark 4:19, NIV) drown out His voice. Your problem is allowing all the background noise. Jesus always did His Father's will (John 8:29). That's because He often "withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Luke 5:16, NIV). Spending quiet time with God significantly increases your hearing ability. It'll be interesting when you see God face to face. You'll discover how much of what you did on earth was what you were supposed to do!

What most distracts you from serving God with all your heart?

Read Luke 1.

46 Prepare and Pray

I've had a recurring dream. I'm suddenly horrified to realize I signed up for a college course but didn't attend classes the whole semester. Tomorrow is the final exam. That dream reveals I fear failure, and preparation is my go-to strategy to avoid it. Preparation has often brought me success in life. Although planning and effort alone can bring earthly success, they are only part of bearing much spiritual fruit that will remain (John 15:8). Preparation and prayer are both vital.

What God can do through us (Philippians 4:13) dwarfs what we can do. I water, fertilize, and weed the tomatoes in my garden, but I can't make them grow. God does. Similarly, while only God can

bring spiritual growth (1 Corinthians 3:6–7), He expects us to plant, water, and fertilize spiritual seeds. “The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the LORD” (Proverbs 21:31, NIV). The warrior gets ready for the conflict, but the Lord delivers victory.

Nehemiah diligently prepared to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. He also prayed and fasted before he approached King Artaxerxes with his request to go to that city (Nehemiah 1:4). He shot an arrow prayer while he was making his request (Nehemiah 2:4). He asked for letters for the governors of the lands west of the Euphrates River to pass through their lands safely (Nehemiah 2:7). He wanted a letter to get timber for the project from Asaph (Nehemiah 2:8). He surveyed the damaged wall before developing his plan (Nehemiah 2:12–15). He prepared to defend Jerusalem while the wall was constructed (Nehemiah 4:13). Nehemiah also prayed for God to move, planned for it, and prayed all along the way.

Prepare as if everything depends on you and pray as if everything depends on God! Read Luke 2.

47 Does Jesus Still Heal?

Paul, a missionary in Asia shared the story of Prem, a man whom Jesus transformed. Prem’s problems started when he broke one of his toes. His feet became totally numb. While doctors were treating him at the local hospital, they discovered there was no blood flow in his leg. They directed him to another hospital in the city.

When he arrived there, his leg had become gangrenous and had turned black. The doctors wanted to remove it. He wasn’t ready to lose his leg or the difficulties that would bring. He put up with the pain for months even though it made him miserable. Even his family members treated him like an outcast.

He spent money on witch doctors, but they didn’t help. The gangrene continued to spread. He eventually decided to return to the hospital. The doctors decided to amputate his leg and put him in a waiting room while they prepared for the operation. Sadness overwhelmed him.

He was lying in his hospital bed when a Christian relative named Paul came to visit. Paul shared the Gospel with him and read

Matthew 4:23–25: “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him” (NIV).

Paul encouraged Prem to believe in Jesus. Prem surrendered his life to Christ. Paul prayed for Jesus to heal him. Immediately, the pain lessened. Within an hour, it had completely disappeared.

When the doctor examined Prem again, he was shocked. He asked him what he’d done. The gangrene had improved, and his blood circulation was perfect. The doctor insisted Prem’s recovery was impossible. He packed his leg with gauze and discharged him.

Prem’s serious leg infection, which had lasted for a year, healed in one week. Today, he works in his local church, praises God, and tells everyone he knows about the miracle Jesus performed.¹

How have you experienced Jesus’s healing? Read Luke 3.

48 Effective Evangelism and Prayer

Most churches in America pray for healing from physical ailments. Is that where you feel the greatest need for God’s intervention? Such praying is fine. But the spiritual needs of those without Christ are even more important. Working out of your own abilities, you’re helpless to create spiritual life or renewal in yourself or others. By comparison, brain surgery is a cinch! You need to depend on God moment by moment for Him to make a lasting spiritual impact through you.

Dr. Thom Rainer, the author of *Effective Evangelistic Churches*, studied 576 churches. Each had twenty-six or more conversions per year. Over 98 percent of their leaders agreed that prayer is foundational to effective evangelism. So, how should you pray for your friends, relatives, and neighbors who don’t yet know Jesus personally?

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Claim 2 Peter 3:9 that God isn't willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. Believe God wants to save them because He's laying them in your heart.

Ask God to prepare them to hear, understand, and receive Christ and become good soil that produces an exceptional harvest.

Pray they'll find satisfaction in nothing outside a relationship with God.

Pray God will give them dissatisfaction so strong that they'll want to change and live God's way instead of their own.

Pray the Holy Spirit will pull them toward a relationship with Jesus.

Pray the Holy Spirit will convict them of sin and the need for a Savior.

Pray for them to understand the impossibility of a right relationship with God through good works.

Pray for answers to the questions that are blocking a relationship with God.

Ask for people to communicate the gospel to them through word and deed.

Ask for God's power to live a Christ-filled life before them.

Pray for boldness to speak about Christ, sensitivity to keep quiet when appropriate, and wisdom to know the difference. *Read Luke 4.*

49 Pray-giarism

Plagiarism is taking someone else's work or ideas & passing them off as yours. Pray-giarism is taking God's ideas, words, and will and turning them into your prayers. That's a life-quake-proof foundation on which to build your life. God promises that if you ask anything in harmony with His will, He hears you and will answer your prayers (1 John 5:14–15).

I'll illustrate pray-giarism by showing how Psalm 100 can direct your prayers. "Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth" (Psalm 100:1, NIV). Here are examples of shouting for joy to the Lord prayers— "Lord, I'm yours! I'm a sheep in your flock! You're my shepherd. I shall not want (Psalm 23)! You've forgiven my sins (1 John 2:12)! You credited Christ's righteousness to my account (2 Corinthians

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5:21)! I'm your heir and a co-heir with Christ (Romans 8:17)! Nothing can separate me from your love" (Romans 8:38–39)!

"Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs" (Psalm 100:2, NIV). Prayer includes singing. The Psalms were Israel's hymn book and prayer book. Spiritual passion accompanies spiritual health. True worship is offered happily and cheerfully. A joyful song from my childhood was, "Joy in My Heart." If you know it, sing it through twice wholeheartedly to the Lord. That lifted your spirit, didn't it?

"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" (Psalm 100:3, NIV). We sometimes live as if someone or something other than God were God. Confess that. "Lord, Sometimes I treat other people & things as if they were God. I value them more than I value You. I confess my foolishness. May You alone be my defining passion. I'm Your sheep. I need Your constant attention and supervision. You've taken responsibility for my welfare. Thank you!"

"Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name" (Psalm 100:4, NIV). "I thank you for your overflowing goodness. As I focus on that goodness, may I overflow with thanksgiving. Thank you for...." (Name at least ten things for which you're thankful).

"For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations" (Psalm 100:5, NIV). "You're good and Your love prevails from vanishing point past to vanishing point future. Your faithfulness never takes a vacation. I can't escape it and don't want to. When seas and mountains pass away, Your faithfulness will endure.

You don't have to pray-giarize all your prayers. But they're most intelligent when you do!

Pray-giarize your daily Bible reading today. Use it as a launching pad for your prayers. Read Luke 5.

Chapter 6

HIS FREEDOM FOR YOUR BONDAGE

Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

JOHN 8:32 NIV

50 What's Your Defining Passion?

Deb Hoffman owned the world's largest collection of Winnie the Pooh memorabilia (14,314 items as of 2017).¹ It's her defining passion. Your passions reflect your values and thought life and often monopolize your leisure time. They're what people remember about you. Obituaries often include them. Does it really matter what items are on that end-of-life list? For Christians, it matters!

I once read an obituary that identified a man's defining passion as his love for hunting, fishing, and the outdoors. Reading it made me uncomfortable. My picture amid all the fish I've caught would include far more than 14,314 items. My collection would stink more than Deb Hoffman's collection! I love fishing. But that's not what I want people to remember as my defining passion.

I met a man whose passion was exercise. He once did more than four hundred consecutive pushups. He pushed himself so hard that he had a heart attack. His passion nearly killed him. Your life is a cart, and your passions are the horses that pull it. You choose the horses, but later you often lose the reins. They run wild. Your passions can easily become your idols. They get more attention than God does. That's idolatry from which you must flee (1 Corinthians 10:14).

Is your defining passion loving God with all your being and your neighbor as yourself? If it isn't, you're leading others astray who are watching you. You're living like something is more worthy of your time, energy, and money than God.

What's your defining passion? Read Luke 6.

51 Never Saw It Coming

I was an 11-year-old on my most memorable Christmas Day. Our family wasn't flush with cash when my brothers and I were growing up. A family of five boys and only my father working outside the home drained the best of our budgets. We didn't get or expect many presents.

Well, we finished the festivities that Christmas Day in the living room. We had completed unwrapping our gifts for another year. We didn't get birthday presents. My father told us to take the torn-up wrapping paper out to the garage to dispose of it. When we entered the garage, we were shocked. We saw three red bicycles parked there for the three of us who were "bike ready." They were our very first bicycles. We were as excited as cats at a milk factory spill! It was a total surprise. We never saw it coming.

Christmas Day celebrates another gift we never saw coming. Now, the Jews had been looking for their promised deliverer throughout much of their history. They imagined He'd be like King David who had reigned about 1,000 years before Jesus was born. What they never saw coming was that He didn't come as a political deliverer. He arrived as a spiritual deliverer. They didn't recognize that their spiritual bondage was far more serious than their political bondage. What they never even imagined was that the Lord Himself would enter the world. He appeared as a fully human, helpless child. He grew up to be their Savior. The infinite invaded the finite. The expected "he" would be a "He." "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us," Matthew 1:23, NIV).

*How have the blessings of following Jesus been gifts you never saw coming?
Read Luke 7.*

52 What Is Salvation?

We're not the Wright brothers or Kennedy brothers but the melanoma brothers! Melanoma is the most dangerous form of skin cancer. I alerted my brother about a very dark mole on his back about 35 years ago. He had it checked. It was in the process of turning into melanoma, and a doctor removed it. My dermatologist

detected mine on my left cheek in 2015. He arranged for its elimination. I still have a scar. The intervention of another saved both of us from premature death.

Going your own way independent of God also kills. Like melanoma, in the beginning, the threat to your well-being isn't obvious. Jesus intervened to spare you from eternal death (unending separation from God). The first aspect of salvation is deliverance by God's undeserved favor from the penalty of living life for yourself instead of for Him. It happens all at once when you trust in Jesus' death in your place as payment in full for your waywardness. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8–9, NIV).

The second aspect of salvation is deliverance from the addictive grip that living for yourself instead of for God has on you. The Apostle Paul described it: "For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it" (Romans 7:19–20, NIV). Unlike the all-at-once initial aspect of salvation, deliverance from sin's power is ongoing. It's a life-long cooperative process between God and you. God is like a woodchipper. Your sins are the branches you need to let go of and throw into it. "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" (Romans 8:13, NIV).

The third aspect of salvation awaits a future day. When it arrives Jesus will deliver you from sin's presence, with its penalty and power eternally behind you. Like deliverance from sin's penalty, deliverance from its presence is all at once. "But in keeping with his promise we're looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:13, NIV).

*In what sense do you already experience salvation, but not yet in its fullness?
Read Luke 8.*

53 Building a Wall

The proposed border wall between the United States and Mexico was controversial. Whatever its advantages or disadvantages, building a different kind of wall is far more vital.

I can't build yours. You can't build mine. Somehow, you must protect yourself from yourself. Your greatest threat, you see, is not someone of a different race, color, or creed. It's not a scoundrel outside the wall that's most likely to breach it and harm you. It's the rascal inside the wall. Your errant thoughts and uncontrolled emotions lead inevitably to self-destructive decisions and actions. You're your own worst enemy. Stinking thinking plus emotional commotion produce deeds deep in the weeds. We've all been there.

The wall is your personal thought life bodyguard. Your thoughts shape you. They affect your feelings which, in turn, affect your actions. "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it" (Proverbs 4:23). You guard your heart by controlling what you think. You can't stop a crow from flying over you. But you can keep it from building a nest on your shoulder. Jesus in Matthew 9:4 asked the Jewish religious leaders, "Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts?" You've done that. You've provided popcorn for those thoughts. You've engaged them in prolonged conversation in the private rooms of your life. You've stirred up their forbidden fires with leaf blowers. Later you wondered how things got so out of control.

God gives us specifications to build a wall. It eliminates self-destructive California wildfires of the mind. "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Philippians 4:8, NIV). That wall protects you from untold self-inflicted harm.

Do you agree that you're your own worst enemy? What first step could you take to build a wall to protect yourself from yourself? Read Luke 9.

54 It Came Upon a Midnight Partly Cloudy

I was fine the previous evening. The next morning, I wasn't. I felt so weak while showering that I almost fainted. The flu had claimed another victim. My immune system drew so much energy to fight it that I had an energy crisis. You get the flu by inhaling tiny virus-containing droplets. An infected person's coughing or sneezing launched them. You sometimes inoculate yourself by touching your eyes, nose, or mouth after touching a virus-covered object. The virus attaches to your cells, enters them, replicates, and then infects other cells. Fortunately, it's usually over within seven days.

Another "virus" attaches to you, replicates, and infects your life. It's far more dangerous than the flu virus. No shot can prevent it. No doctor can treat it. You often feel fine physically, although forms of it steal decades from your life through life-destroying addictions. It hamstring your moral and spiritual life. You don't even know it. You're born with it. You also get new "strains" of it from others. Like cancer, it spreads unannounced. It takes over your whole life. Without outside intervention, seven years from now, you'll be no better. The Bible calls it sin. Its unmistakable symptom is living for yourself in a God-centered Universe.

*What symptoms of the virus of sin do you see in others? In yourself?
Read Luke 10.*

55 Letting Go of Yesterday

I didn't consider calling 1-800-Got-Junk and pointing! I did it myself. I threw away the ancient boots I wore when I last worked for the Pennsylvania Fish Commission in 1976. I'd worn them little in the previous 43 years. Still, it was hard to part with them. They didn't fit. But they were spit-polished with nostalgia! They were the last concrete link to my PFC days.

A yesterday focus interferes with being and doing your best today. Crippling memories persist like smog in Beijing. They clutter the closets of your mind. Got Junk can't haul them away, even if you point at them. Crippling memories might include yesterday's stinging, demeaning words that undermine your confidence and sense of worth today. They could be foolish mistakes you made in the past

that still make you feel guilty in the present. They might even involve remembering yesterday's victories and successes and bathing in their glory, real or imagined. Yesterday is a wonderful teacher. But it's a terrible master. The rent is way too high to live there!

The Apostle Paul wrote, "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" (Philippians 3:13–14, NIV). Paul let go of both his past accomplishments and mistakes. Both equally hindered attaining his goal of fully accomplishing God's purpose for his life. Like Paul, learn from the past but refuse to let it master you! Forgiveness is God's remedy for your mistakes. Humility is His prescription for your success.

How do yesterday's victories and defeats still control you today? What will you do about it? Read Luke 11.

56 What Is Real Freedom (1)

On July Fourth, the United States of America celebrates freedom from Great Britain. Political freedom is good. But there's something better. The worst tyrants are the enslaving lies you believe. Knowing and living the truth is true freedom. Jesus said that's what makes you free (John 8:32). A lie you believe is that more _____ will make you happy. Jesus said it won't (Luke 12:15). Another lie: "I'm a loser because I really messed up." Let the one who never messed up cast the first stone! Another lie: "Feelings are a good guide to reality." They aren't! An additional lie: "Life should be fair." It's not. Get over it! Countless other lies enslave you.

What controls you? Addiction is the dominant face of evil in the 21st century in America. Real freedom and addiction can't co-exist. Common addictions: Alcohol, tobacco, drugs, work, internet, gaming, caffeine, television, love, negativity & self-doubt, exercise, shopping, food, gambling, and pornography. The addicted are like a mosquito riding on an elephant thinking it's the navigator. What controls you? "Got to" is not your friend even if you "got to" go to church or "got to" read the Bible. Healthy spirituality is "want to." You can escape "got to" by the Holy Spirit's power. Christian

freedom is the ability to do what you ought by that power. Political freedom is great. Spiritual freedom is greater by far.

What “got to” motivations still control you? Trust the power of the Holy Spirit to set you free from each one. Read Luke 12.

57 What Is Real Freedom? (2)

In November 1976 I was driving a back street in Fargo, North Dakota. My wife and I had just recently moved there. A car whizzed through the intersection one hundred feet ahead from right to left. When I got there, I was shocked. There were no traffic signs at the intersection. I was free to zip through Fargo’s intersections. But I wasn’t free to feel safe when I did.

God’s natural laws foster harmony and predictability in the natural world. Light doesn’t travel 186,000 miles per second today and one mile per hour tomorrow. The earth doesn’t constantly change its speed of rotation or the path of its orbit. Water doesn’t freeze at 32 degrees today and 80 degrees tomorrow.

God’s spiritual laws are elaborations of how to love Him and your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37–39). Natural laws undergird harmony in the universe. Similarly, the law of love underlies relational harmony. Freedom isn’t doing whatever you want whenever you want, wherever you want. A “Whatever” sign is not your friend.

The health and harmony of your physical body depend on each body part’s doing what is best for the whole. If the fingers hold a cigarette and the lungs inhale the smoke, the whole body suffers the consequences. Underneath real freedom is the ruling principle of love.

You’re free if you can love God with all your being and your neighbor as yourself. Unfortunately, selfishness often disrupts harmony. Like a spider, it crawls into every corner and crevice of human relationships. You crush the spider by repeatedly choosing to do what is best for God and others for the long haul.

Consciously choose to do what is loving rather than what is best for you at least once today. Read Luke 13.

58 Habit Stitched

Habits are stitches that hold your life together. Good ones, like back stitches, are strong. They help you reach your potential. Bad ones, like running stitches, are easy but weak. They decrease your effectiveness. You have running stitches in too many places. They pull loose and hurt you relationally, emotionally, spiritually, physically, and financially. They offend others and diminish your influence. Moreover, habits like overeating, overstressing, overspending, and overmedicating can dominate you. Like a screaming drill sergeant, they make your life miserable.

Good habits empower you and keep you functioning effectively. The challenge is to replace the running stitches of unhealthy habits with back stitches of good habits. In the last forty years, I've replaced my ineffective oral hygiene habits with good habits. For example, I now use an electric toothbrush twice a day. I've replaced criticizing others' unhealthy habits with more tolerance. Now I only have about 147 unhealthy habits left to work on!

It's best to pull and replace running stitching as soon as possible. You can pull young habits, like young oaks with a gentle yank. Over time, habits and oaks root ever deeper and resist removal. When habits are forming, you're wise to evaluate if you should keep them. The Apostle Paul wrote, "I have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. 'I have the right to do anything'—but not everything is constructive" (1 Corinthians 10:23, NIV). You've got the right to burp, pick your nose and say "Ah" frequently while public speaking. But it's not beneficial or constructive for your communication! Evaluate the stitches of your habits. As pouring water into a glass displaces its air, good habits poured into your life displace the bad.

Identify at least one of your unhealthy habits and begin a good habit to replace it.

Read Luke 14.

59 Are You Content?

A bathroom remodeling commercial showed "before" (the old shower facility) and "after" (the new shower). The "before" would

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have been a significant upgrade to my shower. Somehow it still manages to get me clean! You accumulate debt by buying things you don't need and can't afford.

The debt problem in the USA springs from terribly expensive, widespread discontentment. Commercialism nurtures it. They're the peanut butter that baits the mouse trap of credit card debt. The average such debt is \$5700 per household in the USA. Those 45–54 years old have the most. Millennials and those older than seventy-four have the least.¹ By contrast, contentment is a calm, quiet spirit. It's satisfied with new enough and good enough. Those with it feel good even if they're driving a 12-year-old car. Better than those without it driving a three-year-old model.

The Bible links contentment with trust in God. The fear of the Lord enables contented rest (Proverbs 19:23). The Apostle Paul learned to be content with whatever material things he had. That was because Jesus Christ was his trusted resource. He provided everything to accomplish whatever Paul needed to do (Philippians 4:11–13). Contentment with your allotment of food and clothing plus godliness is a path to wealth. It's available (1 Timothy 6:6, 8). You can be content because God is always with you and won't forsake you (Hebrews 13:5). Contentment with what you have unlocks the door of the "love of money" prison. Learning contentment allows you to avoid unnecessary debt. It helps you escape it if it presently has you in its choke hold. Contentment is satisfaction with new enough and good enough.

How would satisfaction with new enough and good enough improve your financial situation? Read Luke 15.

Chapter 7

HIS VINE FOR YOUR BRANCHES

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

JOHN 5:15 NIV

60 Purifying Dirt

As a child, I stuffed my mouth with black wood soil. My cheeks bulged like a chipmunk. I don't remember swallowing the stuff. But I've never forgotten its taste. The taste of the soap too! I hope I didn't ruin your dinner!

You're incredibly well-organized dust. For a change, science and the Scriptures both agree on that (Genesis 2:7). That leads me to one of life's mysteries. How did your mother expect you to wash the dirt off dirt?

As a human, you're also "dirty" morally and spiritually. God labels your very best moral deeds as one star, at best. "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away" (Isaiah 64:6, NIV). Your sins control you like the wind directs the path of a fallen leaf. Is there any hope at all?

Yes! God has always cared about moral and spiritual purity. He gave specific directions in the Old Testament to purify people and their lips, garments, altars, houses, land, and the temple. There are 26 Old Testament references using the word "purify." It's always people who do it. Only two New Testament references describe God's part in purifying "dirt." One of the two is conditional: "If we confess our sins, he's faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9, NIV). The other describes God's purpose behind Jesus' life, death, and resurrection: "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" (Titus 2:14). On this earth, you'll always be dirt. But like a pure, white flower, five-star good things can come from the dirt after you receive

Jesus as your Lord and Savior! He wants to use your purified dirt to produce much fruit that will remain (John 15:8)!

How are you encouraged by the fact that Jesus can rescue and purify “dirt”?
Read Luke 16.

61 Fulfilling Your Dream

It’s always too soon to quit! About ten years ago, we put a bird feeder in our backyard. We did all we could to keep the squirrels away from it. We watched them try one tactic after another. Finally, they learned how to get to that birdseed. They refused to give up.

Dr. Martin Luther King had a dream. So do gray squirrels! You have one too, don’t you? You want your life to count for something. You want to create more than a ripple on the lake of life. You can. You need a vision. You need help to accomplish it. You need gray squirrel persistence. You need quiet confidence you can do it.

Your vision defines what you want to be or do. Don’t settle for what you can do by yourself. The New England Patriots have won six Super Bowls through teamwork. You achieve more when you work together with others to accomplish your vision. You accomplish most when you collaborate with God and other believers. With their assistance, you can complete God’s purpose for your life.

Your quiet confidence that you can do it should anchor in God’s promise: “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” (Ephesians 3:20, NIV). If God calls you to minister to the homeless, don’t stoop to be the President of the United States or a Super Bowl-winning quarterback!

What do you believe God wants to do through you? Who can help you?
Read Luke 17.

62 How to Leave a Legacy

What do you know about your eight great-grandparents? How did their lives affect yours? One of my great-grandfathers worked as a rail straightener at Bethlehem Steel and ate fat sandwiches. Another was a weighmaster, clerk, salesperson, and insurance agent. Two others were farmers. One of them committed suicide when he was

eighty. My four great-grandmothers were all stay-at-home spouses. That's all I know about them. What will your great-grandchildren remember about you?

You author the story of your accomplishments in disappearing ink. It's like a psalm I wrote on a four-by-six card. The sun bleached it. It was unreadable 15 months later. Time erases all memory of what you've done, like the sun bleached away what I'd written. "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" (Psalm 103:15–16, NIV).

You leave a legacy by investing your life in that which is eternal—other people. Instead of selfishly trying to carve your accomplishments on monuments of stone, inscribe them on human hearts through sacrificial, loving service. Bear much fruit that will remain. Because Paul did that, he could write to the Corinthians: "You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Corinthians 3:3, NIV). Servants leave a legacy.

What kind of legacy do you want to leave? What needs to change for that to happen? Read Luke 18.

63 Pleasure's Place

I was one of the first players off the bench on my junior high basketball team. I reported to the scorer's table. I said, "Selcher in for Brown." I usually entered the game when Brown was in foul trouble. Henry Brown made the third-team all-state in Pennsylvania as a senior basketball player. For more than 50 years he's held my high school's single-season scoring record. He was also a football star. He was selected in the tenth round of the 1970 NFL draft as a wide receiver and punter. Selcher was never an adequate substitute for Brown!

Almost three thousand years ago, King Solomon concluded pleasure is not an adequate substitute for purpose. Pleasure is not bad in itself. You must moor it to the right dock. Adrift, pursued for its own sake, it promises more than it can deliver. It eventually disappoints. It leaves you empty and unfulfilled. Like a soap bubble,

pleasure bursts when grasped, betraying your trust in it to make you happy.

The really strange thing is how slowly you learn your lesson. You're naturally in the group of "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" (2 Timothy 3:4). That misplaced love chokes spiritual fruitfulness (Luke 8:14). It leaves nothing substantial in return. Like a drug addict, you pursue pleasure all over again today even though it disappointed you yesterday and the day before. I'm reminding you about pleasure's place.

King Solomon describes it. In Ecclesiastes, written near the end of his life, he concludes that work, knowledge, relationships, and pleasure find their proper place only when you moor them to the dock of God. "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind" (Ecclesiastes 12:13, NIV). Pleasure, in its proper place, is the by-product of God-centered living. "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" (Psalm 16:11, NIV). It happens naturally when you stay connected to the vine (John 15:5).

How satisfying has pursuing pleasure for its own sake been for you? What's its proper place? Read Luke 19.

64 Have I Done Enough?

Alex Honnold free-climbed the Freerider route of El Capitan without a rope or safety gear on June 3, 2017. No one else has ever done it. It's one of the all-time great athletic achievements. Is he pushing toward even greater goals? No. "Everybody already thinks I've done the best thing I'll ever do," Honnold said, "So I don't feel any obligation to top that."¹ Doing more could easily end with a long fall and sudden stop!

Alex may have done enough, but you haven't. "I've arrived!" is personal growth's mortal enemy. Good enough is great's most frequent competitor. Your biggest failures are the successes you never pursued because of self-satisfaction. Spiritual complacency is especially dangerous.

A.W. Tozer said, "Complacency is a deadly foe of all spiritual growth. Acute desire must be present or there will be no

manifestation of Christ to His people. He waits to be wanted. Too bad that with many of us, He waits so long, so very long, in vain.”² Jesus said those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled (Matthew 5:6). Such hunger and thirst, like that of a growing teenager, are reliable signs of spiritual health and vitality.

The Bible consistently condemns complacency. Three of the six times a form of the word appears in Scripture it’s associated with a false sense of security (Isaiah 32:9, 11; Amos 6:1). The self-satisfied aren’t secure. God expects a return on His investment in you (Matthew 25:14–30). You’re not saved by good works but for them (Ephesians 2:8–10). Fruit is good. More fruit is better. Much fruit is best. “This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples” (John 15:8, NIV). It’s always too soon to retire from bearing fruit.

*What signs of spiritual complacency do you see in your church? In yourself?
Read Luke 20.*

65 The Price of Fruit

If you don’t center your life on bearing fruit, you’re missing your purpose! Speaking of fruit, here’s the cost per pound of 28 fruits in the United States¹: watermelon (\$.32), cantaloupe (\$.52), banana (\$.55), pineapple (\$.65), honeydew (\$.83), grapefruit (\$1.01), orange (\$1.10), papaya (\$1.29), mango (\$1.32), tangerine (\$1.48), pear (\$1.52), apple (\$1.62), peach (\$1.68), nectarine (\$1.88), plum (\$1.99), pomegranate (\$2.08), kiwi (\$2.18), grape (\$2.24), strawberry (\$2.51), apricot (\$3.09), cherry (\$3.21), mixed berries (\$3.64), blueberries (\$4.39), cranberries (\$4.69), dates (\$5.51), blackberries (\$5.66), figs (\$6.13), and raspberries (\$6.88).

My interest in fruit comes naturally. My father’s ancestors raised wine grapes commercially in the 19th century. They did so in what’s now Serbia and in the early 20th century near Middletown, Pennsylvania. Producing quality grapes is a divine-human partnership. The farmer spends time, energy, and money. But if God doesn’t make the grapes grow, it’s all for nothing. Spiritual fruit also has a price for both God and you.

The price God paid to set you free from sin’s penalty and power is beyond calculation. “For you know that it was not with perishable

things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Peter 1:18–19, NIV). God set you free to bear much fruit (John 15:8). But much fruit has a price. You must deny yourself (Luke 9:23). You must live for Jesus instead of yourself (Romans 12:1). You must quit conforming to the world’s ways of thinking and living (Romans 12:2). You must remain in Jesus (John 15:5). You must allow His words to remain in you (John 15:7). You must submit to God’s pruning (John 15:2). You must labor unto weariness to complete God’s purpose for your life (Colossians 1:29). Given your purchase price, can you justify doing less?

What did God pay to get you? What are you sacrificing so others can share in the blessing of belonging to God? Read Luke 21.

66 A Father’s Day Gift for God

In the early 1970s, I got a loan from my Aunt Elizabeth to buy a used 1972 VW Squareback. The loan was her idea. She offered it without interest. I was grateful for her generosity. I repaid her within six months. I recently saw a 1972 Squareback advertised on the internet (Runs great!) for ten times what I paid! Incidentally, mine didn’t run great 46 years ago!

In the spiritual world, God paid the Mt. Everest-size sin debt you’ve incurred. You’ve accumulated it by living a self-centered existence in a God-centered Universe. The penalty for such rebellious foolishness is death (Romans 6:23). Jesus paid it for you by dying in your place (1 Peter 3:18). Gratitude is the best gift you can give in return. You show it best when you love God with all your being. You show it best when you love your neighbor as yourself.

By God’s grace through faith, you become God’s child (John 1:12). His expectation is that you’ll be an apple that doesn’t fall far from the tree. That was not happening in Deuteronomy 32. “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. They are corrupt and not his children; to their shame they are a warped and crooked generation. Is this the way you repay the LORD, you foolish and unwise people? Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you

and formed you?” (Deuteronomy 32:4–6, NIV). The best repayment and the best Father’s Day gift for God are to love others as you love yourself. Make the family resemblance obvious! May everyone know to what Vine you’re connected!

What will you give today to demonstrate the family resemblance?

Read Luke 22.

67 The Worst Sin

The Golden Raspberry Award Foundation gives the Golden Raspberry Award for the worst movie of the year. For about 20 years it also gave it to the worst original song of the year. The Worst Sin Award (made up!) goes to the worst sin of the year. And the winner is....

Before announcing the winner, consider the nominees. Billy Graham thought the worst sin was unrelentingly rejecting God’s offer of forgiveness made available by Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection (Mark 3:28–29). There’s no forgiveness for that one. Proverbs 6:16–19 (NIV) describes seven sins the LORD hates. They include “haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies and a person who stirs up conflict in the community.” Other nominees falling under biblical condemnation include child sacrifice, sex with animals, incest, sorcery, blasphemy, worshipping false gods, legal corruption, same-sex activity, lies, and social injustice.

I’m suggesting an additional nominee. Even worse than practicing the previously mentioned sins is influencing others to practice them. The LORD condemned Baasha, king of Israel, for following the sins of Jeroboam and causing the Israelites to sin (1 Kings 16:2). The Old Testament condemns “the sins of Jeroboam” 24 times. The people followed Baasha who was, in turn, following Jeroboam. They traveled paths God never intended. Jeroboam’s sins were going viral. Jesus condemned the Pharisees for leading others astray: “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” (Matthew 23:15, NIV). The worst sin is leading

others away from God and His ways. By contrast, the highest virtue is influencing others to follow Jesus. That's what branches remaining in the Vine do!

How are you demonstrating the highest virtue? Read Luke 23.

68 Who Is the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit isn't a force or a thing. He's the Third Person of the Trinity. One God consists of three co-equal, co-eternal Persons in fellowship together. The Holy Spirit is God, as are the Father and the Son. But the Holy Spirit is not identical to the Father or the Son.

The Holy Spirit was active with the Father and Son in the creation of the physical world (Genesis 1:1–2). He was at work in Jesus' birth (Matthew 1:18) and baptism (Matthew 3:16). He was present at His temptation in the desert (Matthew 4:1) and public ministry (Luke 4:18). Jesus depended on the Spirit's power to complete his earthly assignments.

The Holy Spirit brings you the new birth (John 3:5–8). The Father sent Him to guide and strengthen you. He comforts you and is with you forever (John 14:16). He's the Spirit of truth (John 14:17, 15:26). He guides you into all truth (John 16:13). He testifies about Christ (John 15:26). He enables you to do the same (John 15:27).

The Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8). He's like an everywhere-present prosecuting attorney. He convicts people that they're guilty of sin. They're helpless before the Holy God of the Universe. Faith in Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection is God's solution. It's His answer to your lack of 100 percent righteousness. It's His fix for the problem of eternal condemnation. There's no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).

Because you belong to Christ, you have the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9). God's Spirit leading you demonstrates you're God's child (Romans 8:14). You know you belong to God because His Spirit bears witness with your spirit (Romans 8:16). He sets you apart for His work (Acts 13:2). He guides you in it (Acts 16:6–7). He empowers you to be His witness (Acts 1:8). He helps you pray by interceding for you with groans words can't express (Romans 8:26–27).

He's given you at least one spiritual gift (1 Corinthians 12:1–11). He inspired the men who wrote the Bible (2 Peter 1:21). He helps you understand it. When He controls you, you express Jesus-like character traits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23). He's the engine of your spiritual life!

How is trying to live the Christian life in your own strength like trying to drive a car without an engine? Read Luke 24.

69 Living in the Spirit

You can't live the Christian life in your own strength. You don't have to. The Holy Spirit is the fuel that allows you to burn on for Christ without your service consuming you.

Living in the Spirit is the Holy Spirit's empowering you to live for and be like Jesus. There are two requirements. The first is to deny your own pride, selfishness, and ambition. The second is to yield the driver's seat of your life to the Spirit. The alternative is to live for yourself and miss a full, meaningful life that makes an eternal difference.

When you're living in the Spirit, new desires emerge. One is a hunger for God's word. Another is the desire is to see others come to know Jesus too. When you're living in the Spirit, you meet the righteous requirements of the law (Romans 8:4). You don't gratify sinful desires (Galatians 5:16). You do good works (Ephesians 2:10). You demonstrate love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23). You live in the light and in the truth (3 John 4). The Spirit empowers your witness (Acts 1:8).

There are three requirements to live in the Spirit. You must want the Holy Spirit's control. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled (Matthew 5:6). You must confess any sins the Holy Spirit reveals. Once you do, God promises to forgive and purify you (1 John 1:9).

You live in the Holy Spirit by faith alone (Hebrews 11:6). Without trust, you can't please God. God's will is for you to live in the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). When you ask God to help you do what He wants, He always does (1 John 5:14–15).

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The Holy Spirit can daily fill you through the following prayer:

Lord, I present my body, soul, and spirit to You now. I want You to think with my mind, love with my heart, and bless others through the strength You'll give me today. By faith, I claim the control and power of Your Spirit right now. Thank you for it in Jesus' Name. Amen.

Are you daily trusting the Holy Spirit to control and empower you?

Read John 1.

70 His Fellowshiping Branches

Christian fellowship is far more than sharing a potluck dinner. It's sharing Christ's life together. Fellowship is a choice. The early Christians "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42, NIV). Jesus is the vine. The members of His church are the branches. How do those branches relate to each other?

Collaborating with other believers to further God's Kingdom brings joy and pain. The Apostle John focuses on joy in 1 John 1:3–4. Sometimes, however, fellowship brings pain. We let each other down. We poke each other with our porcupine quills when we get close. God shapes us as we love other imperfect people. He provides enough grace to get the job done.

Fellowship is God's workshop. He uses it to grind away your pride, self-centeredness, and self-importance. In the New Testament, "one another" and "each other" verses often portray love in action.

Be at peace with each other (Mark 9:50). Wash one another's feet (John 13:14). Love one another (John 13:34). Be devoted to one another with mutual affection. Honor one another above yourselves (Romans 12:10). Live in harmony with one another (Romans 12:16). Stop passing judgment on one another (Romans 14:13). Agree with one another (1 Corinthians 1:10). Have equal concern for each other (1 Corinthians 12:25). Serve one another in love (Galatians 5:13). Don't be conceited or provoke and envy each other (Galatians 5:26). Carry each other's burdens (Galatians 6:2). Be patient, bearing with one another in love (Ephesians 4:2).

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other... (Ephesians 4:32). Speak to one another with psalms, hymns,

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and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19). Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21). Do not lie to each other (Colossians 3:9). Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another (Colossians 3:13). Teach and admonish one another with all wisdom (Colossians 3:16). Encourage one another and build each other up (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

Live in peace with each other (1 Thessalonians 5:13). Always try to be kind to each other (1 Thessalonians 5:15). Encourage one another daily (Hebrews 3:13). Spur one another on toward love and good deeds ...encourage one another (Hebrews 10:24–25). Do not slander or grumble against one another (James 4:11, 5:9). Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other (James 5:16). Live in harmony with one another...love one another (1 Peter 3:8). Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling (1 Peter 4:9). Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another (1 Peter 5:5).

God has designed the church to feed, mature, shelter, and reproduce the faith. We're each sanding blocks and God is the builder. Christian fellowship is life rubbing against life to nurture what's Christ-like and remove what isn't.

How has Christian fellowship brought you both joy and pain? Read John 2.

Chapter 8

HIS LIGHT FOR YOUR DARKNESS

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

JOHN 8:12 NIV

71 People of the Truth

Lies are the devil's nuclear weapons. He has no truth in him. He's the father of lies (John 8:44). He camouflages his untruths as half-truths and 90% truths. Daily you swallow them. Few of them are obvious. Not everything you believe fervently is true.

Truth no longer corresponds to reality. Milk takes the shape of its container. Likewise, truth takes the shape of its human container. You're told that one hundred different persons' definitions of love are all true. It's okay if they contradict one another. Truth is whatever you want it to be.

God hasn't departed from the reality standard. He's the Judge Judy of the Universe! For now, people can play word games. They can twist the truth into convenient shapes. They can ignore or redefine reality. But they can't escape it or the consequences of their actions. Calling black white and wrong right doesn't make it so.

On Judgment Day you'll have to explain every careless word (Matthew 12:36). Everything hidden will be uncovered before God's eyes. It's to Him you must give account (Hebrews 4:13). No one will tell Him truth is relative! He judges based on the truth (Romans 2:2).

Speaking the truth about God's ways requires that what others think doesn't sway you (Matthew 22:16). Truth came to earth through Jesus Christ (John 1:17). When you live in it, you've nothing to hide (John 3:21). Knowing it sets you free (John 8:32). The Holy Spirit guides you on the path of truth (John 16:13). You're made more like Jesus through God's word which is truth (John 17:17).

Jesus came into the world to reveal the truth. But not everyone is a fan of it (John 18:37). False teachers distort it (Acts 20:30). Wicked people suppress it (Romans 1:18). Those who reject it are self-

seeking. They choose to follow evil rather than the truth (Romans 2:8). Love rejoices with it (1 Corinthians 13:6). The church is the pillar and foundation of it (1 Timothy 3:15). You can't separate knowing it from believing it (1 Timothy 4:3). You purify yourself by obeying it (1 Peter 1:22).

*What lies from the devil have you detected since you became a believer?
Read John 3.*

72 How to Glorify Jesus

Jesus is the light of the world (John 8:12). He shines in the darkness (John 1:5). Empowered by the Spirit, He completed the work the Father gave Him to do (John 4:34). He told His followers that their light was to shine before the world so that others would see their good deeds and glorify their Father in heaven (Matthew 5:14–16). Your light shines when you perform the good deeds God gives you to do (Ephesians 2:10).

“You” and “your” in Matthew 5:14–16 are plural. Don't think of Christians individually shining like fireflies on a summer night. Picture the northern lights with no obvious point source. Matthew describes a “group shine.”

The power supply for your light is the Holy Spirit. His purpose is to glorify Jesus (John 16:14). He supplies the current for your light bulb. You have unique gifts to contribute to increasing the wattage of the group lighting project.

The volume of virtuous deeds done and the measure of love among the members of the “village of light” determine the light's brightness. The intensity of the light is dynamic. The faith and obedience of individual members affect the waxing and waning of its brilliance. They determine the degree to which it shines like Jesus.

The individual lights keep changing. People die. Some move away. Some fall away. Some get weary of doing good. New believers join the congregation. Believers transfer to the church from other churches. The church must replace those who minister to others generation after generation. New lights which just blinked on must change the way they think, talk, and behave to glorify Jesus. The church must deploy them in ministries that fit their divine designs, or the group's shine will diminish.

The key questions aren't, "How many of us are there?" and "How much money do we have?" It's "How bright is our light?" We shine brightest when we draw people to faith in Christ, disciple them in Jesus' ways, and deploy them in the ministry for which God designed them. All in a loving atmosphere.

What will you do to draw people to Jesus, disciple them in the faith and deploy them in ministry to keep the light of Jesus shining through your church generation after generation? Read John 4.

73 Falling off the Wagon

Do you know the origin of the expression "falling off the wagon"? The wagon was a water wagon drawn by horses. People used it to wet down unpaved streets to reduce the dust in the late 19th century. Falling off the wagon means returning to drinking alcohol from drinking water.¹

You face "falling off the wagon." It includes going off a diet that helped you lose considerable weight, quitting an exercise program that improved your health, re-engaging in a previously kicked habit, and much more. Like the pull of a magnet on a nail, the attraction of the long-haul injurious, short-term enjoyment never stops. It's a dark, destructive gravitational force. It's a moral black hole from which no one escapes unless God intervenes. Those who get away feel its relentless tug to return.

In Numbers 14:4 the Israelites decided it was better to return to Egypt than to trust God. They refused to believe they could conquer the land He had promised them. In Egypt, they had been brick-making slaves. They didn't remember all the hardships of bondage. Jesus' followers face the "returning to Egypt" temptation. They easily forget the oppressive chains that previously confined them. They don't recall the depths of misery from which God delivered them. The old ways powerfully draw them back, like a long-lost two-faced friend.

Trusting God is hard. Returning to the deadly but familiar paths of yesteryear is easy. I've noticed many who make professions of faithfulness to Christ and a local church quickly forsake both. In a Bible study, a friend once said he'd never abandon Christ and His

church no matter what others do. He hasn't. I'm with him. How about you?

What old ways of thinking and behaving still haunt you? What is your plan to keep from returning to them? Who can help you? Read John 5.

74 Protecting Your Heart

Your eyes are your heart's bulletin board. The harder you think, the bigger your pupils become.¹ They enlarge when you look at something you love.² Your heart stores what your eyes see. (Deuteronomy 4:9). It impacts what you feel (Deuteronomy 28:67). Your heart belongs to what your eyes delight in (Proverbs 23:26, Ezekiel 24:25). Your eyes both program your heart and reflect its thoughts and feelings. Like a keyboard and screen, they register both input and output.

Eyes that lust after God-substitutes grieve Him. They indicate a heart that's not fully His (Ezekiel 6:9). Chasing after the lusts of your own heart and eyes is spiritual adultery (Numbers 15:39). God repeatedly condemns haughty eyes and proud hearts (Psalm 101:5; 131:1, Isaiah 10:12). In fact, haughty eyes are one of the seven things He hates (Proverbs 6:17).

What you see affects your mood, temper, and even how generous and kind you are to others.³ If you don't control what you see, your life is like a house with doorways but no doors. Whosoever and whatsoever will enter. That won't end well. Wise choices are like a door that separates what enters your life from what doesn't. The foolish view everything that's viewable. They never avert their eyes. Not controlling what enters the eye-gate pollutes the springs of your heart. This certainly applies to pornography in all its forms. If not looking away when you should always produce severe chest pains, you'd do a better job of protecting your eyes and heart. So would I.

What you really need is a new heart and eyes that thrive in the light, not the darkness. Closed eyes are associated with a calloused heart (Matthew 13:15). God promises a new heart (Ezekiel 36:26) and the ability to see spiritual realities (Ephesians 1:18). God's word gives joy to the new heart and light to the eyes (Psalm 19:8). Paul prays that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened to know all you have in

Christ (Ephesians 1:18). You protect your heart by limiting what your eyes see!

In what situations do you need to do a better job of averting your eyes? Will you start today? Read John 6.

75 All Religions Are Not Equal (1)

Imagine a steaming bowl of tomato soup in front of you. To the left of the bowl is a fork. To the right is a spoon. Which will you use to eat the soup?

For about 2,000 years Christianity has been the only God-designed “vehicle” to take people from earth to heaven. Getting people there is difficult. Many believe all religions lead to the same destination. The truth is that all except Christianity have a serious flaw. They don’t solve your most pressing spiritual problem.

You see the dark, downward pull of sin at work in others with 20-20 clarity. It’s so obvious! Their pride is as glaring as the sun. Their pettiness is disgusting. They drive like idiots. Their kids are a mess. They are so self-centered.

When it comes to seeing your own faults, however, you’re legally blind! What about your pride, pettiness, driving habits, kids, and self-centeredness? “Mirror, mirror on the wall, I can’t see myself at all!” Why are you so blind to your own faults?

Sin dominates you. You’re like an alcoholic who insists he is perfectly in control of his drinking. Sin has you by the throat. But you won’t admit it. Your natural rebelliousness seems like no big deal. Self-rule seems virtuous. Independence from God results in “sin-dependence.”

A foolish combination of independence, self-sufficiency, and imagined invulnerability sank the Titanic. Its builders underestimated the destructive power of icebergs. Humans consistently misjudge the sinking power of sin. According to Romans 3:23, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” and according to Romans 6:23, “the wages of sins is death.”

Imagine wearing glasses that distort everything. Airplanes look like bluebirds and vice versa. Trees look like weeds and weeds like mature oaks. Black is white and white is black. Girls look like guys

and guys like girls. Your view of the world doesn't correspond to reality at all. Your "sin-fogged" glasses are to blame.

*How are your devotional disciplines helping you see yourself as God sees you?
Read John 7.*

76 All Religions Are Not Equal (2)

The teachings of the Enlightenment of the 18th century are glasses that have influenced people to believe that everyone is good. They have within themselves the resources to live a moral life, manage society, and solve all their problems.¹ If that were true, every day in every way civilization should be getting better.

The belief that all religions are similar arose during the Enlightenment. Religions look different on the surface. But the deeper you go into each, the more similar they become. All are rooted in a common religious consciousness in the human heart.² Religions share similar moral values. None approve of adultery, theft, or murder. Most religions since Confucius contain the essence of the golden rule, "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12, NIV).³

These 18th-century ideas were exactly wrong! Religions are most alike at the surface. Imagine ten department store Santa Clauses in a lineup. Underneath the white beards and red suits are ten different people. Similarly, each major religious tradition has its own distinct way of looking at the world.⁴ Religions aren't the same and don't claim to be.

Religions aren't "take your choice" belief systems that lead to heaven by different routes. They often contradict each other. For example, Judaism rejects Jesus as the Messiah; Christianity affirms him. They can't both be correct. Either tolerance or truth must give way.

How does that agree or disagree with your understanding of the Christian faith? Is tolerance or truth more important to you? Why? Read John 8.

77 All Religions Are Not Equal (3)

Different religions don't believe the same basic things at all. Let's contrast Christianity, the most common religion, with Islam, the second most common religion in the world.

Muslims don't believe that man is at heart a sinner or that sin wrecks man's relationship with God.¹ Christianity teaches that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23, NIV) and that "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23, NIV).

Muslims consider Jesus a prophet but not God's Son. Hebrews 1:1–2 (NIV), referring to Jesus, tells us that God "has spoken to us by his Son."

Muslims say Jesus didn't bear the world's sins, didn't die on the cross, and that every person must bear responsibility for personal sin. In 1 Corinthians 15:3–4, Paul wrote that Christ died for our sins and that he was buried and raised on the third day.

Muslims teach that almost everyone will spend at least some time in hell and perhaps all eternity. The only hopes for escaping it are Allah's will, the prayers of Mohammed and saintly Muslims, and one's own good deeds.² According to 1 Timothy 2:3–5, God doesn't want anyone to spend eternity in hell. There's one person who "goes to bat" for us before God. That person is Christ Jesus. According to Ephesians 2:8–9, escaping hell is by God's grace received through faith. It's not the result of works so that no one has any room to boast before God or men. Let's compare Islam and Christianity.

The Bible is corrupted and untrustworthy [Islam]

All scripture is God-breathed and useful (2 Timothy 3:16).

[Christianity]

There is no religious assurance. [Islam]

We can know we have eternal life (1 John 5:13) [Christianity]

One can't know that he's forgiven. [Islam]

If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us (1 John 1:9) [Christianity]

The Holy Spirit doesn't live in the believer.³ [Islam]

The Holy Spirit lives in believers (Romans 8:11). [Christianity]

Why can't Christianity and Islam both be true? Read John 9.

78 All Religions Are Not Equal (4)

In John 14:6, Jesus claimed that no one comes to the Father except through Him. What He did on the cross has no equal in any other religion. “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12, NIV). “For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5, NIV).

Jesus is uniquely qualified. He’s the “Holy and Righteous One” (Acts 3:14). He was without sin (1 Peter 2:22). He’s the only one capable of paying the penalty for your sin because He was sinless and therefore had no penalty of His own to pay. The early church worshipped Him as God.¹

Jesus lifts crushing guilt off fragile human shoulders. He gives strength to conquer the passions and desires that control you like the wind turns a weathervane. He gives peace to replace the haunting fear of God’s condemnation. He experienced that condemnation when He took your place on the cross.

No other great religion has a savior. None has a God who personally paid the price to set His people free. No other forgives through undeserved favor alone. None has a religious leader who rose from the dead.

Henry Rowland, a brilliant American scientist, taught physics at Johns Hopkins University. At a trial in which he was an expert witness, concerning his qualifications, he said, “I’m the greatest living expert on the subject under discussion.”

Jesus is the greatest living expert on truth. Through Him, God has revealed Himself in a form you can understand. He’s God’s “Show and Tell.” He lived and spoke the truth.

How do the things Jesus offers correspond to the things you need in your innermost being? How does that give the ring of truth to His claims?

Read John 10.

79 All Religions Are Not Equal (5)

If Jesus is really the only way to God, what about those who have never heard about Him? You can be sure that God will be just. Genesis 18:25 asks, “Won’t the Judge of all the earth do right?” The

expected answer is “Yes.” God won’t save anyone because he/she is a Methodist, Hindu, or Buddhist. All receive salvation who accept God’s unmerited forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ’s sacrifice in their place.

The tax collector said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” He went home with a right relationship with God (Luke 18:9–14, NIV). The key requirements are a God-given sense of need for divine mercy, and trust in God to give it.¹

You can’t build a road to heaven with your virtuous deeds. That’s like trying to lay some concrete four-lane highway three thousand miles long from a single wheelbarrow of cement mix. That’s the fatal flaw of most religions. The problem—you don’t have enough building materials. Especially when the good things you’ve done for the right reasons limit it.

You can get to heaven from here, but there’s only one way. It’s narrow and steep. The good news—it’s an escalator! God Himself constructed it at a tremendous cost. It ends in heaven. It begins for every person with one faith step. According to Jesus, He’s the only way to get there (John 14:6).

The issue is truth, not a superiority complex. A math teacher expects her students to add two plus two and get the same answer she does. Four is not the best answer. It’s the only right one. There’s no room for pride. No other answer will do.

Imagine a surgeon has a scalpel that hurts more than any other. It’s also the only scalpel that unfailingly cures cancer. If you had cancer, you’d submit to that scalpel, wouldn’t you?

The Christian message has never been wildly popular. The scalpel hurts before it heals. It’s painful to admit a total inability to meet God’s right-living requirements. It’s humbling to accept His unmerited forgiveness through trust in Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection alone. The stubborn fact is that no other way leads to life.

Why is Jesus being the only way to God a matter of truth rather than religious pride? Read John 11.

80 Are You Making a Lasting Difference?

My father had nine apple trees. We picked them every October. We stored their fruit in our unheated garage. Over the winter at least one-third of the apples rotted. One year we made all the apples into applesauce and froze it. After that, we never stored apples in the garage again. We found a way to conserve all the fruit we picked.

Some of the fruit of your life lasts. Some don't. I want mine to last. I'm guessing you want yours to last too. Fruit comes in two varieties—the fruit of the light and the fruit of darkness (Ephesians 5:9, 11). The first lasts. The second doesn't. Making a name for yourself rots in the garage. So do accumulated material things and earthly power. Your earthly influence can multiply and spread long after your funeral. That's the drumbeat of the forward march of God's kingdom on earth. So, what is the fruit of the light that attracts and influences others, generation after generation?

By the Holy Spirit's power, the fruit of the light is Christ-like character—love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23). Such shining draws attention. Christ-centered living in a self-centered world is the fruit of repentance (Matthew 3:8). It's like a candle in the cave of the world's darkness (Matthew 7:15–20). Some try to extinguish it. It attracts others. It influences other people to follow Jesus as you translate Him into your cultural setting (John 15:5). It includes goodness, doing what is right, and speaking and living according to God's truth (Ephesians 5:9). It pulses as you please the Lord by doing the good works He sets before you and get to know Him increasingly well (Ephesians 2:10; Colossians 1:10). It radiates when you openly profess and praise Him (Hebrews 13:15). It beams as you display wisdom, purity, peace-loving, consideration, submission, mercy, impartiality, and sincerity (James 3:17). You can make a lasting difference one hundred years from now if you live in the light today!

What motivates you to live in the light today? Read John 12.

Chapter 9

HIS SIGHT FOR YOUR BLINDNESS

Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind."

JOHN 9:39 NIV

81 Why You Need Glasses

According to Elite Daily, those who wear glasses enjoy significant advantages over those who don't. They're viewed as more intelligent and professional. Employers are more likely to hire them. They view them as more trustworthy and friendly than those with 20/20 uncorrected vision.¹

Except for reading, I parked my glasses in their case in 2014 thanks to cataract surgery. Before reading the Elite Daily article, I had no idea how much I was handicapping myself and diminishing how others see me!

You need glasses to make wise moral and spiritual decisions. You don't wear them because you're nearsighted or farsighted. You wear them because you're naturally self-sighted. "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit" (Judges 21:25, NIV). You consistently make choices based on what's best for you as opposed to what's best for God and others. You can't clearly see how God wants you to live.

God has wisely provided corrective lenses so you can see as He does what's important in life. They enable you to see what's right and good. "Do what is right and good in the LORD's sight, so that it may go well with you and you may go in and take over the good land the LORD promised on oath to your ancestors" (Deuteronomy 6:18, NIV). The more you read and apply the Bible, the more you can clearly see life from God's perspective. Those are the glasses He provides. You need them!

How has daily Bible reading improved your spiritual vision? Read John 13.

82 Would Your Mirror Lie to You?

My daughter once spotted two one-half-inch-long white hairs under my right jawbone. I unknowingly had missed them while shaving. In 2015 my dermatologist found a life-threatening melanoma on my left cheek. Months before, a lady at my church had suggested I get that mole checked. I didn't worry at all that it was a genuine problem. I was shocked when the dermatologist announced the diagnosis. You don't see yourself as you really are. You see what you want to see. You believe what you want to believe. Your mirror doesn't lie. You do.

You lie to yourself when you live like God doesn't exist. You lie to yourself when you pursue a self-centered life in a God-centered Universe. You lie to yourself when you substitute bible knowledge for obedience. "Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do" (James 1:23–25, NIV).

You must speak the truth in love to other believers (Ephesians 4:15). Apart from my daughter and my dermatologist telling me the truth, I'd have continued to be self-deceived. Without listening to God, you will too.

Take a risk and speak the truth in love to someone this week and be receptive when they speak it to you! Read John 14.

83 Do You Know What You're Missing?

Eyeglasses improve vision by focusing light directly on the retina. Polarized glasses filter out glare and enable anglers to spot fish beneath the water's surface. Both types of glasses can help you see what you're missing. Yet even a 20/20 vision doesn't guarantee you'll see what's right in front of you.

That's because you see what you're conditioned to see. After we bought a Mazda, we saw far more of them on the highway. They were always there. We just didn't notice them.

Your preconceived notions and biases organize the reality you perceive. They focus it on the retina of your assumptions. You see what you've always seen. You see what you want to see. Competing political parties bend the same information to opposite conclusions for their own purposes.

Seeing only what you want to see carries significant negative consequences in the spiritual realm. Spiritual sight is a choice. Not everyone sees God's eternal power and divine nature evident in creation. That's because they want to hide their behavior (John 3:19–21, Romans 1:20). Jesus, through the new birth, came to remove the “cataracts” that prevent 20/20 spiritual vision (John 3:3, John 9:39). Those “cataracts” are the work of the god of this world (2 Corinthians 4:4). They render religious and nonreligious people equally blind (Matthew 23: 16, 17, 19, 24, 26). A sure sign religious people can't see is a lack of love for others (1 John 2:11). A calloused, hardened heart produces eyes incapable of seeing spiritual reality (Matthew 13:15, Mark 8:17, Acts 28:27). Seeing depends on choosing to come to Jesus and saying, “Lord, I want to see” (Luke 18:41). As Philip said, “Come and see” (John 1:46)!

How has your spiritual vision improved since the day you decided to follow Jesus? Read John 15.

84 Your Assumptions Can Be Your Worst Enemy

I fell flat on my back on a street in Fargo, North Dakota. I assumed the street wasn't icy. It was. Your assumptions often cause you to slip.

I once posted “The Validity of Testimony” on Facebook. I tried to direct it toward Christians. Surprisingly, atheists authored more than 80% of the comments I received. They made fun of, attacked, or tried to undermine the idea that Jesus Christ could change anyone's life. They reject Christianity as a harmful delusion.

They fired verbal missiles, sometimes crude, at believers who commented positively about my post. One individual commented more than twelve times before he blocked me from responding back. I challenged him to read the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ in *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* by Josh McDowell. He refused. That's the predictable response of atheists whom I've so

challenged. They assume such evidence doesn't exist. They decide not to consider it.

You often slip by drawing conclusions based on unexamined assumptions. Atheists don't prove Christianity and Christian testimonies are a delusion. They assume it. They assume, with no proof, that we live in a closed system of cause and effect. No supernatural being can intervene in it. They assume they can explain the world as it is without the actions of a superior being. Even if that were so, that doesn't prove God doesn't exist. They can't imagine God's visiting us in Jesus Christ. They've already assumed it can't happen. They don't prove there's no God and miracles can't happen. They assume it. They take refuge in their ignorance. They refuse to use their eyes to see and ears to hear (Jeremiah 5:21). They slip on their assumptions. They're without excuse. "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" (Romans 1:20, NIV).

*How would regularly examining your assumptions benefit you and others?
Read John 16.*

85 A Primary Force That Shapes You

Your assumptions shape you more than your heredity. Unexamined assumptions are shade-blocked windows to the real world. Unbelievers haven't really concluded there's no God. They've assumed it. They build their thinking on a foundation of four assumptions. They live in a closed system of cause and effect. No outside influence can affect that system. There's no supernatural God who can suspend natural law. Miracles can't happen. Believers assume the exact opposite. They build their lives on those assumptions.

Unbelievers assume life is about them. Believers assume it's not. Those contrasting assumptions lead in exactly opposite directions. Unbelievers live to glorify themselves. That results in mostly getting with minimal giving. Believers live to glorify God. That's mostly giving with some getting. How you think influences how you live to an extraordinary extent. It shapes you more than your physical appearance. It shapes you more than how athletic you are. It shapes

you more than the place in the society into which you were born. Your assumptions lead to a focus on self, on one hand, or God and others on the other.

Unbelievers imagine unrestrained human will is unlimited. Coaching track and field for more than twenty years has taught me that's not true! Fully 100 percent of those I've coached haven't had the hereditary gifting to make the Olympic team no matter how hard they worked. That principle has broad application. Positive thinking is better than negative thinking. But "You can accomplish whatever you set your mind to do" is simply wrong.

The good news is you can accomplish whatever God has given you to do! "I can do all this through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13, NIV).

What's the difference between "You can accomplish whatever you set your mind to do" versus "You can accomplish whatever God gives you to do."

Read John 17.

86 Why Two-Wheel Drive Thanksgiving Isn't Enough

Two-wheel drive thanksgiving seems adequate when the traffic light stays green. It works when sunny weather comes for the picnic. It's easy to apply when you're promoted, or your grandkids visit. By contrast, you need a four-wheel drive on thanksgiving when God seems AWOL or deaf. It takes you places two-wheel drive thanksgiving can't. Fully healthy believers are thankful despite adversity, pain, and suffering. Such thanksgiving demonstrates trust in the God who works all things together for good (Romans 8:29).

How much does it take to stop your thanksgiving? For me, it's disappointingly little. I don't gush thanksgiving when the lawnmower won't start. Anger and thanksgiving can't occupy my mind at the same time. You don't have to guess which one dominates in such situations. I'm stuck in the two-wheel drive when I need four-wheel drive.

1 Thessalonians 5:18 (NIV) says, "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." That sounds like four-wheel drive thanksgiving to me!

You start life spiritually blind (2 Corinthians 4:4). Your vision doesn't instantly become 20/20 when you decide to follow Jesus.

You tend to magnify negative circumstances. You feel helpless and hopeless in adversity. You focus on what you can't do instead of what you can do through Christ who strengthens you (Philippians 4:13). Your vision improves gradually as God's word renews your mind. Other believers help you understand spiritual truth. I'm indebted to J.I. Packer, A.W. Tozer, C.S. Lewis, Bill Bright, Josh McDowell, Paul Little, Fred Smith, and others. It takes effort to get a better grasp on spiritual truth. As you see God's grace at work in adversity, you become more thankful.

Being permanently rooted in Jesus Christ (Colossians 2:6–7), nurtures four-wheel drive thanksgiving. It flows from abiding in Him (John 15:5). Rooting determines potential. Tomato seeds planted in a soup can produce few if any tomatoes. A gratitude problem reflects at least a temporary disconnect from Jesus. He's the source of four-wheel drive thanksgiving. I want my thanksgiving to be a four-wheel drive. How about you?

How will you demonstrate four-wheel drive thanksgiving today?

Read John 18.

87 He's Got You Covered

When I was afraid as a child, I sometimes crawled into bed and pulled the covers over my head. Don't laugh. It worked! The monsters under my bed never touched me!

Your fears often make as little sense as my childhood defense strategy. Fear limits you. Faith frees you.

Faith is only as good as the trustworthiness of its object. Trusting a liar's promises leads to disappointment. Trusting One who never lies sets you free to become ever more like Him. An all-powerful God is watching over you. He loves and covers you with His feathers. You find refuge under his wings (Psalm 91). He moves with you! Be bold today!

What bold step will you take today because God is with you?

Read John 19.

88 What's Wrong with Camouflaged Christianity?

You averted your eyes downward. You froze like a snowshoe hare in a snow-covered forest with a fox approaching. You didn't have a firm grasp of the material. The teacher randomly peppered class members with questions. You prayed she'd not call on you. That would reveal the profound depths of your ignorance. It was your blunder storm prevention strategy. I've done it. Have you?

Because you fear ridicule and humiliation, you sometimes camouflage your Christian faith. You keep it invisible in potentially hostile environments. I've done it. Have you?

How can you climb out of that guilt-drenched, shame-packed hiding place? To conquer fear, you must confront it. Refuse to let it win. It's how people face cancer courageously. "You're in me, but you won't beat me!" Stare fear down. By the power of the Holy Spirit walk toward the light. Move relentlessly in the path of obedience despite fear. Doing that today makes it slightly easier to do it tomorrow. But it's never easy.

If fear of men overwhelms your trust in God, you need a faith lift. I suggest meditating on the following Scriptures: "The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?" (Psalm 118:6, NIV). "So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?" (Hebrews 13:6, NIV). "In God I trust and am not afraid. What can man do to me? (Psalm 56:11, NIV). "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?" (Psalm 27:1, NIV). "What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31, NIV). An ounce of God's "Well-done" is worth enduring a ton of ridicule.

*What fear do you need to face today and stare down by acting despite it?
Read John 20.*

89 What Happens When You Tell the Truth?

Mary Baker Eddy taught that disease is a mental error, not a physical disorder. She advised treating the sick not by medicine but by a form of prayer. She thought the prayer corrects the beliefs

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responsible for the illusion of ill health.¹ She erred greatly. My aunt believed her. She died from the “illusion” of cancer. Truth matters. Truth excludes falsehood or mere appearance. The New Testament definition of truth includes faithfulness and trustworthiness.

Jesus reveals life as it is and can be. He’s utterly dependable. What He says, He does. What He appears to be, He is. From His innermost being rivers of integrity flow. He’s full of grace and truth (John 1:14). He’s the source of the same for all who receive Him (John 1:17). Is your truth-telling up to the full mark? Do you have leaks that need to be sealed and forgiven?

Jesus is the truth standard and spring. He enables you to be a person of the truth. To walk in His footsteps you must speak and live the truth. Both are challenging. Lying is habitual among political leaders and their followers alike.

Have you kept your mouth closed while friends, relatives, and neighbors live meaningless lives apart from Jesus? They’ve no clue God could change that. Ouch! Failure checkers my own life there. I’ve been more concerned with what they think of me than what they think of Jesus’ offer of forgiveness, freedom, and purpose. Have you as well? Telling the truth with gentleness and respect can be the turning point in their lives (1 Peter 3:15). It’s also risky. When Jesus told the truth, people became believers. Others became angry. You can expect the same when you tell the truth.

In a Peanuts comic strip, on the first day of the new school year, the students authored an essay. Lucy wrote, “Vacations are nice, but it is good to get back to school. There is nothing more satisfying or challenging than education. I look forward to a year of expanding knowledge.” The teacher was pleased. In the final frame Lucy leans over and whispers to Charlie Brown, “After a while, you learn what sells.”² That’s just the temptation, isn’t it?

A woman in my church made food and gave a serving of it to another person in my church. She later asked that woman, “How was the such-and-such?” She said, “Oh, it was fine!” The giver said, “That’s strange. Mine was wormy.” The woman caught in the lie insisted she wouldn’t repeat that error. Life frequently tests such commitments. Both remaining silent when you should speak and lying smooth relationships temporarily. But at a great long-term cost.

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Is your truth-telling up to the full mark? What leaks need to be sealed and forgiven? Read John 21.

Chapter 10

HIS ASSURANCE FOR YOUR DOUBTS

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

1 JOHN 5:13 NIV

90 Extending Your Expiration Date

In November 1985, the people in a church I pastored observed their annual tradition of giving food items to the pastor's family. Among them was a faded Jell-O box with an expiration date of 1972! One can consume Jell-O and other food items safely after the expiration date. But I'm guessing a pinch of that Jell-O could have dropped a seven-ton elephant in his tracks!

Your life on earth has an absolute expiration date. It's not stamped under your left armpit or under your right foot. Doctors sometimes guess at it for patients with terminal conditions. Based on my present age, experts predict I'll live to be 84.73 years old if I'm average. I'm rooting for above-average! In 2015 my father, lying in a hospital emergency room, told me this was it for him. I didn't believe it even though he was 102 years old. He was right. His death was a painful expiration date reminder.

Do you know how to extend your expiration date indefinitely? Jesus told Martha, "and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:26, NIV). "Never" speaks of a life that is unimaginably long! Yes, your physical body will wear out and blow a gasket somewhere, sometime. But the real person will continue to live forever through believing in Jesus. Trusting in His sacrificial death in your place makes the perishable imperishable (John 3:16)! You have limited time to extend your expiration date. God is offering His favor now (2 Corinthians 6:2). It's wise to receive it while you still can. Eternal separation from God doesn't have an expiration date either (Matthew 25:46).

*How will the reality of your expiration date affect how you live today?
Read Acts 1.*

91 Am I a Christian?

I'm an American citizen. My birth certificate proves I was born in the USA. Federal, state, and local governments expect me to pay income taxes. At 18 I registered for the draft. I'm a registered voter. My county has contacted me twice for jury duty.

I'm a Christian too. I wasn't born one (no one is), but I was born again to become one (John 3:3). It was 100% undeserved (Ephesians 2:8-9). I'm not as good as Jesus which makes me a sinner (Romans 3:23). Jesus died on the cross to pay in full the death penalty for my sin (Romans 6:23). Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection are the basis for God's accepting me (2 Corinthians 5:21). I'm trusting God's promise that Jesus' death has erased my sin debt. I opened the door of my life to Jesus and made Him my Leader (Revelation 3:20). I don't trust in my own charitable deeds or in feeling virtuous. I trust in what Jesus has done for Me and in God's keeping His promises.

I'm a Christian but I don't have a new birth certificate to prove it! The Spirit of Jesus who lives in me communicates to me that I'm His child (Romans 8:16). The Bible knows nothing about a trust that makes me right with God that doesn't also make me a more loving person (James 2:26). Since I received Jesus into my life, I'm more obedient which demonstrates I love God (John 14:15). I have more love for others, especially other believers (1 John 3:14). I'm far more interested in the Bible. I'm more forgiving. I pray more. Persistent guilty feelings no longer weigh me down. I enjoy being with other believers. I enjoy helping others. I want others to know Jesus too.

Specifically, how has your faith reshaped you to love Jesus and others more? How is your love growing? Read Acts 2.

92 Can I Trust My Feelings?

The short answer is "No." What you do when you don't want to do anything determines much of what you accomplish in this life. Most people don't want to go to work on a Monday morning. But they go anyway! Circumstances are like a string that controls the yoyo of your feelings. When life is going well, you feel on top of the world. When it's not, your feelings bottom out. If your feelings govern your relationship with God, your spiritual life will be as unstable as a two-

legged chair. You'll often wonder whether you're really a Christian. There's a better way.

You must trust the facts (God's character and promises) and not in whether you feel like you're a Christian. Faith believes in and acts on God's promises. Such trust produces the stability of knowing you have eternal life now (1 John 5:11–13). That knowing begins by simply taking God at His word. If you open the door of your life to Jesus (Revelation 3:20), He promises to come into your life. He doesn't say He might. He doesn't say that He will think about it. He says He will. That makes you a Christian whether you feel like Jesus is in your life or not. Your feelings are not dependable. But God's promises are. You can trust them because Jesus is the truth (John 14:6), the truth comes through Him (John 1:17) and God can't lie (Numbers 23:19).

Faith is the only sure foundation for knowing that Jesus is living within you. Without it you can't please God (Hebrews 11:6). You please Him by stepping out and putting your whole weight on His character and promises. They're like thirty-inch-thick ice that supports trucks. They support you when you're bold enough to step out on them.

How has trusting in God's character and promises rather than your feelings brought you freedom from fear and doubt? Read Acts 3.

93 Push Button Rescue

“Help, I've fallen, and I can't get up!” The television commercial seemed hilarious. Then little by little, my ever-increasing age sucked the funniness right out of it! Medical alert equipment helps countless senior citizens. Monitoring costs about \$500 per year.

Dialing 911 is another push-button rescue strategy. People in the United States make about 240 million 911 calls a year. I'm guessing you've done it at least once. The price for a follow-up ambulance ride is at least \$500.

“Help, I've fallen, and I can't get up” acknowledges you need to be rescued. That old television commercial accurately illustrates your spiritual condition. You've fallen far short of God's holy standard. Your spiritual failures, like a two-ton weight jacket, prevent you from getting up on your own. Your fallen condition also prevents a

personal relationship with God. From an unpretentious I-can't-get-up, "prone" position, you cry out, needy and helpless. You can't pay the rescue's price. Only Jesus can. He paid more than you can imagine to freely forgive you without a \$500 plus ambulance or monitoring fee.

A crying-out-for-rescue attitude begins to turn you from self-orientation to a God and others orientation. You humbly depend on God's rescuing power alone. You realize you can't save yourself. You trust in the complete sufficiency of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection to deliver you from the paralyzing weight of your failures and the addiction to living as if you were God. You believe Jesus' work on the cross is enough to rescue you because God said it was (John 3:18). The supernatural peace you feel when you accept God's free, undeserved gift of forgiveness attests to its truth (John 16:33).

How did owning your sickness contribute to your spiritual healing?

Read Acts 4.

94 How to Make a Difference

Like a stone thrown into a pond, your life leaves ripples. Your influence can be a great blessing or a curse. Your life influences others more than you realize. My grandfather died in 1939. I never met him, yet he influenced me. I believe I must keep my promises no matter what it costs me. My grandfather taught my father that value. He taught it to me. That's a positive value because it reflects God who always keeps His promises.

Your negative behavior also influences others. I once possessed a wallet that had belonged to a deceased man in western Pennsylvania to whom I'm distantly related through marriage. It became mine because, at the time of his death, none of his immediate family wanted anything that had been his. I suspect that loving his family wasn't his defining passion.

Although others influence you, you can't use them as an excuse for your misbehavior. The Israelites tried the "It's my daddy's fault" excuse 2,500 years ago (Jeremiah 31:29–30). God shot it down. You sometimes blame others for your problems. If I could kick the rear of the person responsible for 80 percent of my problems, I'd not be

able to sit for a week! I suggest the same principle applies to you as well!

Most moral problems result from putting yourself rather than God at the center of your life. God isn't the defining passion of most professing Christians. Too many church-going folks are apathetic and uncommitted because they've never really repented. They came to Jesus "just as I am" and remain just as they were.

Repentance includes a different attitude and behavior. It includes a commitment to five basics to bless others: believing in prayer, the Holy Spirit's filling you, the word of God, daily obedience, and telling others what Jesus means to you. In other words, you're effective when you live the "normal" Christian life.

Why is the "normal" Christian life anything but normal among professing Christians? Read Acts 5.

95 Are You Noticeably Different?

About 84 percent of young non-Christians say they know a Christian personally. Only 15 percent say the lifestyles of those Christians are noticeably different in a good way.¹ That doesn't commend how closely professing Christians are following Jesus, does it?

Don't misunderstand Jesus' words in Luke 9:23 about His followers denying themselves and carrying their crosses. Your cross is the problems you face and the suffering you endure because you're a Christian.

If you're a Christian, you dare not settle for less than following Jesus ever more closely. You can take a giant step in that direction by taking a five-minute Spiritual Health Assessment. One person who took it said, "I found the inventory to be a great reality check of where my heart is rather than just a checklist of something to do. I tend to score myself tough.... I'm concerned about my score (1.44 average) which I interpret to mean that I need to focus more on Christ and where my heart is...."

Honesty is essential. You can lie to yourself for a higher score. But self-deception doesn't benefit you, God, or anyone else. No one will know your score except you and anyone you desire to tell. You can use this resource to track your growth as a disciple. Think of it as

a friend helping you prepare for the Final Exam when Jesus reviews your life face to face.

The assessment examines how well your everyday behavior aligns with Jesus' values and behavior. It also looks at why you do what you do. For example, it doesn't say, "I read the Bible daily." It says, "I look forward to reading the Bible daily." "I want to" is healthier than "I must."

You can find the assessment at:

<https://www.christiangrowthresources.com/spiritual-health-assessment>. After the assessment, focus on improving one or two areas with the lowest scores. The Spiritual Health Helps resource provides specific suggestions. These two resources will show you the next step toward being part of the 15 percent who are noticeably different in a good way!

What is your plan to strengthen the one or two areas the assessment revealed as weak? Read Acts 6.

96 Eleven Signs of Jesus' Life in Me

Vital Christian faith leads you to become more like Jesus (Romans 8:29). If it doesn't, it's as dead as a cell phone without a battery. The unique quality of Jesus' life within you reveals itself in at least eleven ways.

The first is the Holy Spirit's transforming presence in your life (1 John 4:13). Jesus died to save you from sin's penalty. The Holy Spirit leads you in the fight to kill your God-offending habits and behaviors (Romans 8:13–14). As you do, the Spirit testifies with your human spirit that you're God's child (Romans 8:16).

Another vital sign is believing that Jesus is the Christ (1 John 5:1). Such belief moves beyond agreeing with the historical facts about Jesus to trusting His death, burial, and resurrection instead of your own good works to make you 100% acceptable to God. It's not your belief plus your good works that make you right with God but belief that produces good works as its fruit.

Another mark of belonging to God's family is obeying Jesus' commands (1 John 2:3). The commands you obey shape your life for better or worse. Jesus' commands to love God and others (Matthew

22:37–39) make you more like Him. When that's your goal, obeying Him is easier.

Another vital sign is loving other believers (1 John 3:14). Choosing to bless others by self-sacrificial giving is its defining characteristic. It's action-oriented, not feelings-oriented.

Another sign is doing what's right (1 John 3:10). The Judge of all the earth does what is right (Genesis 18:25). You do too as His child as you follow your made-in-heaven internal moral compass.

Other signs of Jesus' life in you include desiring to read and act upon the Bible's instructions (2 Timothy 3:16–17), forgiving those who have offended you (Matthew 6:15), praying regularly (1 Thessalonians 5:17), God's deliverance from the guilt of your sin (Hebrews 10:22), wanting to spend time with, serve, and encourage other believers (Hebrews 10:24–25, Galatians 5:13, 1 Thessalonians 5:11) and telling others what Jesus has done for you (Acts 1:8).

Which signs are most obvious in you? Least obvious? Read Acts 7.

97 What You See Is What Others Get

What you see in the mirror is what others get. How you see yourself significantly colors others' pictures of you. If you see yourself as a loser, you might as well tattoo "loser" on your forehead. It'll be that obvious to others. If you see yourself as capable, others will detect your quiet confidence and guiding compass of purpose.

This principle operated when the spies of Israel reported on their exploration of the Promised Land. Ten spies saw multitudes of professional basketball-sized inhabitants. They said it was a wonderful place, but not for them. "We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them" (Numbers 13:33).

Self-image built on athletic ability, status in society, or physical appearance is like a sand-castle on the beach. The rising tide of adverse circumstances, aging, and life's kicks and punches will eventually undermine it. You need more security than a do-it-yourself foundation can give. God provides it.

"For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11). Neither time nor

eternity can shake it. Jesus' death in your place forever establishes your worth. God paid Jesus to get you. That affixed your worth with the ultimate price tag with never a price rollback. By God's grace, through repentance and trust in Jesus' sacrifice for you, you become God's child (John 1:12).

*Do you see God's child in the mirror? Why is that important?
Read Acts 8.*

98 Why Maximum Security Was Not Disappointed

My family watches the Kentucky Derby on television—the Preakness and the Belmont too. We cheered for Maximum Security on May 4, 2019. We thought he had a chance to win the Triple Crown. His crossing the finish line first made us happy. Then, another horse's owner challenged that victory. Video replays clearly show this previously undefeated horse veered in front of other horses. He disrupted their momentum. We were disappointed when race officials overturned his victory.

These race officials informed more than 150,000 people at Churchill Downs and millions watching on television of the overturn. However, Maximum Security wasn't disappointed. He finished the race first. Don't bother trying to convince him otherwise! He didn't pay attention to what television newscasters said or what newspaper journalists wrote about his race. He had no sense of interfering with other horses, even though he did. He won!

You sometimes ignore what God says about you in favor of your own opinion. That's hazardous to your spiritual health. You underestimate how far short you fall from God's moral perfection apart from faith in Christ. You underestimate how righteous your standing is by grace through faith in Christ. On one hand, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23, NIV). On the other hand, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21, NIV). Agreeing with what God says about you equips you for reality with maximum security!

*Why must your spiritual security be faith-dependent, not feelings-dependent?
Read Acts 9.*

Chapter 11

HIS PEACE FOR YOUR ANXIETY

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

1 PETER 5:7 NIV

99 Is the Wind Always at Your Back?

A traditional Gaelic blessing says, "May the wind be always at your back." If it is, you're not facing your fears! You're taking the easy way. You might be making great time. But you're not headed anywhere significant. To fulfill God's purpose, you must overcome significant opposition.

Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, faced the hurricane winds of his fear of crucifixion. He said, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42, NIV). To reach their intended heights, airplanes take off into the wind. To follow Jesus, you must face the fears that would prevent you from even attempting take-off. When faith, not fear, controls you, you can please God (Hebrews 11:6).

What paralyzing fear do you need to face and overcome today?

Read Acts 10.

100 Float Away Unhealthy Fear

Some fears are healthy. People instruct their children not to touch a hot stove burner. They tell them not to cross the street without looking both ways. These healthy fears prevent bodily injury. My car's dashboard has more than twenty warning lights. I feel fear when they light up! The healthiest fear of all is the fear of God. Such fear is awe-inspired reverence of Him resulting in submission, worship, and obedience (Hebrews 12:28–29).

When your fear of God dwindles, unhealthy fear takes its place. You worry about future events that might harm you physically or emotionally. Doing so harms you physically and emotionally now. Unhealthy fears make you sick, shorten your life, and endlessly

torment you. When I leave the kitchen, my fear of the red-hot burner dissolves. However, an unhealthy fear of failure can spur me endlessly. Like an insane cowboy, it rides my back 24/7. Unhealthy fear is God's warning signal. The object of your trust needs replaced. "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" (Proverbs 3:5–6, NIV).

The more time you spend in fellowship with God and reading the Bible, the better you get to know Him. It becomes easier to trust Him. Trust in God displaces unhealthy fear. Trust in God or unhealthy fear can fill your life. But both can't fill you at the same time.

*What unhealthy fears have trust in God enabled you to overcome?
Read Acts 11.*

101 Fear and Faith Are Contagious

Rubeola travels faster than lies on the internet! It was the virus behind the measles outbreak in the United States in 2019. Measles is highly contagious. It can cause serious physical problems including death. The same is true of the COVID-19 virus.

My parents encouraged my brothers and me to share. Full disclosure—we shared our diseases better than our toys. We didn't do well in the back seat of the car either (He's on my side!). When the first brother got measles and chicken pox, inevitably, we all did. That was before vaccines.

More than diseases are contagious. In the context of instructions to Israel for going to war, we read, "Then the officers shall add, 'Is anyone afraid or fainthearted? Let him go home so that his fellow soldiers will not become disheartened too'" (Deuteronomy 20:8, NIV). Did you get that? Fear is contagious. Children look at their parents to see how they react to situations. If the parent projects fear, children quickly join them. Your fear spreads like panic in a movie theater when someone yells, "Fire!" That's why God tells Joshua, the commander of Israel's army, four times in Joshua 1 to be strong and courageous.

Faith is an "I've got this through Christ who strengthens me" attitude (Philippians 4:13). Such trust is contagious. I saw it

demonstrated forty-five years ago when I accompanied college students who shared their faith in Christ with other students. Their faith was contagious. They expected God to provide the strength to take a stand for Him. He did. Their example helped me be a witness despite my fear. Fear and faith are both contagious. What will you pass on?

Others can see both your fear and faith. Which will they see today?

Read Acts 12.

102 Anger Bone Connected to the Fear Bone

A man once turned left in front of me without paying attention to oncoming traffic. I couldn't avoid hitting his car. Fear transitioned to anger in a nanosecond. My automatic response before I hit the car was "You jerk!" I launched it with one hundred megatons of venom. My rage exploded. But it subsided quickly enough for me to be civil when I talked to him. Fear often pushes my anger button. It happens before my emotional self-control button engages. I'm not having a great deal of success controlling that kind of anger. It's a blip on the behavioral radar screen. It usually quickly disappears.

Significant amounts of anger in America are the perpetual, simmering kind. Students are angry about school shootings. They fear it could happen in their schools. They're angry about global warming. They fear there won't be a future for them. Frequently, adults display unbridled disdain for leaders and members of the opposing political party. In 2016 almost 70 percent of our citizens were angry at the opposing party's candidate for President.¹ They feared what their agenda would be.

How much American anger results from hyper-anxiety and fear? The United States is the most anxious country in the world.² Psychologist Robert Leahy wrote that the average child today experiences the same level of anxiety as the average psychiatric patient back in the 1950s.³

The remedy for fear is trust in God's sovereignty. Is fear increasing because Christianity's influence is waning in the United States? I think so. You're free to live as if God doesn't exist. But you're not free from the negative consequences of that belief system. I'm not in control of earthly events, but I'm not fearful because God

is. “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” (Isaiah 41:10, NIV).

How does understanding the anger, fear, and faith connection help you understand yourself and others? Read Acts 13.

103 How Can You Dial Down Anger?

Angry outbursts are an expanding epidemic in the United States. They are spreading like superbug bacterial infections. You see it in the political sphere. In mass shootings. On the highways. In churches. In homes. In the mirror. Like gasoline fumes, your anger ignites instantly after someone makes you afraid, inconveniences you, or just disagrees with you. Left unattended, it foams and bubbles. Eventually, it boils over and scalds everyone around it. Today might be that day. Wine improves with age. But anger ages like dead fish.

Anger makes smart people do dumb things. It causes normally kind people to do regrettable things. Turned inward, it produces depression. Turned outward, with equal ease, it scorches enemies and loved ones. Like a mind-altering drug, it supplies an immediate burst of power. But that energy rarely accomplishes anything good (James 1:20). As we wise up, we anger down.

Only the godless in heart cherish anger (Job 36:13). The wise unload anger as quickly as possible (Ephesians 4:26). They drain the anger swamp (Ephesians 4:31, Colossians 3:8). When you anger up, you cause others to do the same (Proverbs 15:18). Anger is communicable. Those slow on the anger draw are better than the mighty (Proverbs 16:32). They don't keep company with those given to anger (Proverbs 22:24) because such behavior leads to transgression (Proverbs 29:22). Pressing others when they're angry is like pressing a hornet's nest with your hand (Proverbs 30:33). They will sting you severely. Anger is repeatedly associated with ungodly behavior (2 Corinthians 12:20, Galatians 5:20, Colossians 3:8). As you wise up, anger down! Stopping the expanding anger epidemic begins with you.

What scars has your anger left on you and others? What step can you take to anger down? Read Acts 14.

104 Border Security

Walls have a place. God designed skin as “border security.” It protects you from attacking ultraviolet rays, bacteria, and viruses. You treat wounds with an antibiotic. You stick a suitable bandage on them. You don’t put a huge bandage on a paper cut. You don’t place a small one on a 2-inch-long surgical wound. You evaluate the size of the threat. You respond accordingly.

Security is never total. There’s a way around every wall. You get flu and colds despite the skin border wall’s best efforts. You inoculate yourself by touching your nose, eyes, and mouth with germ-covered hands. You purchase home security systems. You acquire computer security software, security cameras, and medical alert devices. You install smoke alarms and one-way wide-angle peepholes. All these have their place. But none provide perfect peace. Despite your best efforts, you’re still vulnerable. We lock our doors at my house. But that won’t stop someone who is totally committed to harming us. I don’t worry about it. I do what I can. I trust God with the rest.

You can purchase security devices with quarters. “In God, we trust” appears on all of them in small print. Trust in God is a border wall that brings security and peace that devices can’t. “Don’t be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6–7, NIV).

How has trust in God brought you peace during this last week?

Read Acts 15.

105 Crippling Anxiety

Anxiety isn’t terrible. Without emotional tension, life would be boring. Like watching grass grow or paint dry. A dash of it makes watching your favorite team play an enjoyable experience. You don’t know who will win. Like salt in your food, a little anxiety is good. But too much of it can kill you. Crippling anxiety brings headaches, ulcers, heart attacks, and other physical problems. It wears out your body prematurely without accomplishing anything positive. It reduces

your ability to think clearly. It distracts you when you pray. It restricts your ability to worship God.

So, how do you reduce crippling anxiety? As surely as exercise increases strength, love reduces anxiety. “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear...” (1 John 4:18, NIV). A fear-filled life is like an empty drinking glass. You can remove the air in the glass by displacing it with water. Likewise, you can remove fear by displacing it with God’s love. “He who didn’t spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:32, NIV).

Trusting God to take care of you isn’t like instant coffee—just add hot water and stir. Trust grows over time. God’s word, the working of the Holy Spirit, and other believers who model it nurture it. There’s no better time to begin than now. Turn your anxieties into prayers (Philippians 4:6–7). Unload your anxiety on Him (1 Peter 5:7). He takes care of you as faithfully as He feeds the birds of the air (Matthew 6:26).

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:6–7, NIV).

Trusting God isn’t an escape from reality. It enables you to confront reality most effectively. You must face your fears. Stand up to crippling anxiety. Walk toward it. Even though your heart is racing. You’ll discover what you feared isn’t so intimidating anymore.

What anxieties do you need to unload on God right now? Read Acts 16.

106 Do Right Despite Fear

Our earthly legacy (and heavenly reward) depend on doing right despite fear. President Abraham Lincoln issued an executive order. As of January 1, 1863, the legal status of African Americans in the South would change. From slave to free. His action enraged the Confederate States of America. But it was the right thing to do. He’s remembered as one of our greatest Presidents. The high point of President Ronald Reagan’s presidency came on June 12, 1987. He said, “Tear down that wall, Mr. Gorbachev.” Advisors wanted to cut those words from the speech. They were afraid of the backlash they

HIS POWER FOR YOUR WEAKNESS

could create. He courageously spoke the words. The Berlin wall came down on November 9, 1989.

Israelites returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. They wanted to rebuild the altar. But they had to overcome the fear of the people around them to pull it off. “Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the LORD, both the morning and evening sacrifices” (Ezra 3:3, NIV). Acting despite fear emboldened them. They took the next step and rebuilt the temple with less fear.

I’m often unlike Lincoln and Reagan and the Israelites returning from captivity. I fail to follow through on my best ideas and intentions. I lack the courage to turn them into reality. I fear what others would say or do if I failed. I live too often in the perceived safety that knows neither defeat nor victory. I avoid darts, arrows, and missiles of criticism that way. I also fall short of fulfilling my potential. I’m trying to climb out of that dark well and live in the light of God’s truth despite fear. Would you like to join me?

Specifically, how has being afraid hindered you from bearing more spiritual fruit? Read Acts 17.

Chapter 12

HIS GRACE FOR YOUR NEEDS

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.

2 CORINTHIANS 9:8 NIV

107 What Is Grace?

Imagine someone dumped garbage on your doorstep. You investigated and found four pieces of your neighbor's junk mail. You didn't expect such disrespect. Three days later he knocked on your door and asked for a loan to pay his rent. You refused. Instead, you said, "I'll give you twice as much money as you want. You don't have to pay me back." That's grace—giving others what they don't deserve.

You've dumped your moral and spiritual garbage on God's doorstep. Instead of severely punishing you for your disrespect and insubordination, He offers to adopt you as His child. That's the meaning of grace, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8–9, NIV). Even the ability to believe and receive this astounding, 100 percent undeserved offer is a gift from God. It's not based at all on your virtuous deeds.

But grace is much more. Salvation is about becoming whole, healthy people physically, emotionally, spiritually, mentally, psychologically, relationally, vocationally, and financially. Grace is the dynamic, unseen, exceedingly powerful force that makes it happen. God's Spirit, word, and Son are His agents of grace. The Holy Spirit graciously fills and gifts you with special abilities to serve God and others (Ephesians 5:18, 1 Corinthians 12:1–11). The word of God's grace builds you up and gives you an inheritance (Acts 20:32). Jesus intercedes for you before God's throne to provide the grace to help in your time of need (Hebrews 4:15–16). In every situation you can be strong in the grace that is in Christ (2 Timothy 2:1). Grace can overcome your weaknesses (2 Corinthians 12:9). It takes the shape of

your need, whatever it is, in your journey toward becoming like Jesus (1 John 3:2).

Ask God for the grace you need to bless at least one person today for His glory. Read Acts 18.

108 Disturbing Grace

I wrote a hymn, *Disturbing Grace*, to sing to the tune of *Amazing Grace*. John Newton had no idea how popular his hymn would become. Written in 1779, it's the most popular Christian hymn today. My hymn won't displace his anytime soon! Grace disturbs before it amazes! Before it lifts and frees, it convicts and zings. It shakes a proud, self-sufficient ego like a magnitude 9.5 earthquake.

About 1748, Newton came face to face with his need for God's amazing grace. Only that could save a wretch like him. I've read his biography. He wasn't exaggerating the "wretch like me" part! Something must happen before you can say "fill it up with amazing grace" at the Divine service station. You must recognize the wretch in Monday morning's mirror. That's disturbing. The Magi announced their desire to worship the recently born King of the Jews. That disturbed both Herod and all of Jerusalem (Matthew 2:3). Grace disturbs before it amazes. I invite you to read (and even sing) the following hymn.

Disturbing grace shook my soul; It showed me all my sins.
I'd lived for years like my own king; I lived my life for me.
Then slowly, gently grace released; My soul it did set free.
Disturbing grace once gripped my heart; it turned my eyes
above.

A rebel who deserved to die; How foolish I had been.
God's very throne I had usurped; yet that I couldn't see.
I soared to heights I'd never known; with eagle's wings on me.
Amazing grace He did bestow; He filled my heart with love.

How was grace disturbing in your life before it was amazing?
Read Acts 19.

109 Shape-Shifting Grace

I spent hours in my youth in our driveway batting stones. I imagined I was various major league baseball players of the day. Sharing their names would reveal my age. No, Ty Cobb wasn't among them! Neither was Babe Ruth!

Do you want to be like someone else? Would you choose to be more rich, good-looking, athletic, popular, healthy, strong, respected, thin, smart, or socially adept? You have significant limitations. We all do. You're a caterpillar who looks adoringly at fluttering butterflies. Your heroes reveal what you prize.

The good news is that if you want to be like Jesus, shape-shifting grace is available 24/7. Paul wrote, "Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God?" (1 Corinthians 6:9). After describing specific wrongdoing, he encouraged his readers by writing, "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11). Caterpillars became butterflies through God's shape-shifting grace. They still do.

How so? Proud, self-involved people learn to humbly serve others. Formerly dejected, downcast pessimists find light to replace their darkness. Those who knew only strife, discord, and tumult find peace. Those who complained about minor inconveniences put up silently with major ones. People who didn't use to care about others' needs, sacrifice willingly to meet them. Whatever it takes to transform you from a spiritual caterpillar to a spiritual butterfly, shape-shifting grace accomplishes. Like God, it's everywhere present, and all-powerful. It provides whatever you need to become more like Jesus, whatever it takes!

How does God's shape-shifting grace give you confidence that you can complete today's divine assignments, whatever they are? Read Acts 20.

110 Idle Words

I stopped hunting more than 50 years ago. Until now, I've never told anyone this story. I was small game hunting with my brothers. I unintentionally pulled the trigger of a loaded shotgun. Fortunately, I

didn't hurt anyone. Nevertheless, thoughts of the harm I could've done haunted me.

Unfortunately, I've pulled the trigger of my mouth and fired words at others that have inflicted painful wounds. Sometimes they've left permanent scars. You have also. Perhaps, you'd never shoot an animal. But humans are fair game. Sometimes you fire words carelessly. Sometimes intentionally. Usually, the gunpowder of your anger sends them on their way. Encouraging and tearing down words somehow flow from the same mouth. That's not appropriate for those who profess to follow Jesus (James 3:8–10).

You unthinkingly speak idle words when your brain isn't in gear. Such words don't benefit anyone. They're released like I fired the shotgun. They're lightweight and small caliber. But they have penetrating power all out of proportion to their size. They have no potential to do good. Sometimes they inflict pain. Keeping them to ourselves benefits everyone. That's because too much talk can lead to sin (Proverbs 10:19–21). Often, the best thing to say is nothing.

By contrast, God's words aren't idle. They are our life (Deuteronomy 32:47). He chooses them carefully and lovingly. They're His tools to reprove, correct, protect, build up, teach, and encourage us. "We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away" (Hebrews 2:1, NIV).

How have words caused you pain? How have your idle words caused others pain? Read Acts 21.

111 Prescription for a Critical Spirit

Sober self-judgment is difficult. You sometimes bounce between two extremes—pride and self-loathing. Pride can make you feel like a mixed-breed mutt. It dreams that it's best in the show at the Westminster Kennel Club dog show. You can think that if you're not the best in the show, you're a total loser. Self-loathing, more than pride, is the source of a critical spirit. When you feel bad about yourself, you criticize others. They in turn criticize others in an ever-widening circle.

A critical spirit hurts you and others. It doesn't have to control you. "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” (2 Corinthians 10:4–5, NIV). You can make every thought obedient to Christ. You do that by roadblocking every critical thought inconsistent with a life shaped by Christ. That’s very challenging. Criticizing is often harder to uproot than a 50-foot oak.

A critical spirit can possess you. Your mind can spawn critical thoughts like thunderstorms emerge on a hot, humid day. You can’t stop your sinful nature from manufacturing critical bullets. You can choose not to fire them. You must learn to pick off every critical thought as soon as it appears. Send it packing. Who are you to judge and criticize those for whom God sent his Son to die?

As you feel progressively better about your own worth, you’re less motivated to criticize others. So, how do you calm your own fears and insecurities? You continually center your life on God and His total sufficiency no matter what. “In God I trust and am not afraid. What can man do to me?” (Psalm 56:11, NIV). “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” (Psalm 18:2, NIV). “And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19, NIV). When you’re content with who you are in Christ, you build others up instead of tearing them down (Ephesians 4:29).

*Why is firing critical bullets much worse than thinking critical thoughts?
Read Acts 22.*

112 How Many Apples in a Seed?

Most apples have three or four fully developed seeds. You can easily count them. But counting the apples in a seed—that’s another story!

A seed from a dwarf apple tree often produces a full-size tree. When you plant an apple seed, you don’t know what you’re going to get. If it grows into a full-size tree, you could harvest 30,000 or more apples over its lifetime (and it might outlive you!). Similarly, when

you plant seeds in others' hearts, you don't know what you're going to get!

You can count the seeds you plant through kind words and actions. Perhaps, you donate food to the food bank. Maybe, you teach a class at your church. You coach a kids' baseball team. You lead your children in ways that will bless them. Maybe, you send cards to celebrate others' achievements or comfort them in distress. You provide transportation for senior citizens. You serve on the governing council of your church. You can't count the apples in those seeds. You don't know what they'll produce! Not all seeds germinate. Some might produce dwarf trees with little fruit. Some might produce full-size trees with staggeringly heavy crops year after year. Your life can make more of a difference than you can imagine if you keep on sowing kind words and actions!

“Let's not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:9, NIV).

You will make an unimaginably enormous impact on earth if you sow kind words and actions every day. Read Acts 23.

113 Nurturing Early Bloomers

A Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association 3A boys' state championship basketball game was played on March 23, 2019. Chance Westry scored forty points for Trinity High School in a close loss to Lincoln Park. The big deal was—Chance was a first-year student. Most such high school boys play on the junior varsity. Chance starred on the varsity. He was a gifted athlete. He grew up in an environment that nurtured and developed his talent.

Early blooming needs a supportive environment. Daffodils next to our house on its south side blossom early. When the sun shines, the temperature there is 20 degrees warmer than on the north side of the house. The house's heat also warms these flowers. Similarly, I use a specially designed electric heating pad to speed up the germination of the seeds I plant in our 55-degree basement. It shortens germinating time for bell peppers from 30 days to 10–14 days.

God designed you to bloom and help others blossom. You're a ten somewhere! So are others. To nurture their early blooming, first help them identify their talent(s). Then help develop it (them) by

irrigating with encouragement (Ephesians 4:29). Believing in others releases previously untapped energy. It motivates them to work hard to turn their dreams into reality. Hundreds of hours of practice built the foundation for Chance's 40-point game.

Spiritually, you nurture early bloomers by showing them how to live in the warmth and light of Jesus (John 8:12). Time in His word, prayer, and Christian fellowship irrigate and fertilize their spiritual growth so they can bear much fruit (John 15:8).

Who has influenced your life by believing in you? Whom can you nurture by believing in them? Read Acts 24.

114 What Are You Sowing?

You've heard of black magic and white magic. Have you heard of green magic? I had it in the basement! Really! Eighty percent of the Green Magic hybrid broccoli seeds I planted, germinated. I transferred them about seven days later from the starter mix into potting soil. What I sowed in February found its way into our freezer in May, June, and July. Eventually, it became soup in December, January, and February.

What you sow today creates tomorrow's harvest (Galatians 6:7). It's a life principle. Every day you're preparing for the rest of your life. Saving money during working years prepares you for retirement. Exercising regularly, getting enough rest, and eating healthy foods add up to better health tomorrow. Treating others well at this year's holiday gathering matters. It makes healthy interactions at next year's celebration more likely!

If you sow thistle seeds, expecting to reap green beans is unrealistic. The nasty, cutting, demeaning words you speak today strain and fracture relationships. The conversation that smells like week-old fish carcasses in 90-degree heat, threatens relational bridges. Angry words, obscenities, lying, critical or boasting words burn relational connections as you speak.

Words can both build- and blow-up relationships. It's your choice. Kind, humble, edifying, and courteous words are always appropriate. "Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones" (Proverbs 16:24, NIV).

What will you do today that will make your whole life better in the future?

Read Acts 25.

115 Ashes to Ashes

They were almost worthless. My brother had about twenty dead white ash trees on his property. He couldn't sell them for lumber. He offered them as free firewood (ashes to ashes!). The destroyer was the emerald ash borer. It's a half-inch-long, beautiful green beetle from Asia. Experts predict they'll eventually kill all untreated 308 million ash trees in Pennsylvania. They do so by slowly cutting off a tree's water supply.

That reminds me of another little devastating thing. "Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell" (James 3:5–6, NIV).

Unfiltered, flaming arrow verbal attacks damage you and others. Words spoken in anger and coated with acidic venom brand themselves into minds. "You Jerk!" or "You're worthless!" stick to the soul like epoxy. They're most harmful when significant people in your life launch them. They undermine self-worth and self-confidence. All of us have both sent and received such unfiltered words. Let's send them no more! The Holy Spirit's filling and control is the best filter available. Controlling your anger prevents the launch of thermonuclear words with life-long fallout. God has provided the spiritual resources you need. The wise use them!

Let today's words build others up instead of burning them down. Not a bad idea for tomorrow either! Read Acts 26.

116 Ten Thousand Miles per Gallon Words

He prayed for me at the conclusion of a conference I attended in 2009. He said God had given him a mental picture of an old-fashioned water pump with a handle. He saw water flowing from the pump but much more gushing in the future. He didn't know what that meant. God showed me within five seconds. It described

increased spiritual fruitfulness. At the time, I had no clue that would include internet ministry.

The man's words left me dumbstruck. Our lives touched for less than 60 seconds. I'd never met him previously. I don't know his name. I doubt that I'll see him again on earth. He left me to pray for someone else. If his wife asked him for highlights of his day, I doubt he mentioned me. Yet, his words have fueled hope and energized me ever since that day. He has no idea how much they impacted me. Nor will you know the full impact of your encouraging words this side of eternity. Encouragement is 10,000 miles-per-gallon fuel that energizes others. A molehill of encouragement can make a mountain of difference.

"Therefore encourage each other and build each other up..." (1 Thessalonians 5:11, NIV). You encourage others with both spoken and written words. William Arthur Ward wrote, "Flatter me, and I may not believe you. Criticize me, and I may not like you. Ignore me, and I may not forgive you. Encourage me, and I won't forget you. Love me and I may be forced to love you."¹

What words of encouragement you have received made all the difference to you? How can you pass the baton of encouragement on to others?

Read Acts 27.

117 Hurt to Help

God occasionally wraps His best gifts with the plain brown paper of pain. Those gifts seem cruel and heartless when you receive them. Why did this happen to me? What did I do to deserve this? This is so unfair! The truth is God loves you too much to let you stay just as you are.

From 2008–2018, I had two very painful experiences. I didn't anticipate either one. The first was as emotionally agonizing as my mother's unexpected death when I was seven. In such situations, it's easy to conclude God either isn't in control or doesn't care a lick about me. Neither is correct. I'm not yet the person God has envisioned. His whittling and sandpapering away that which is not Christlike in me hurts. "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:11, NIV).

Like a child content to live on a candy-alone diet, you don't know what you really need. You can't foresee the spiritual development required to become all God designed you to be. When you look in the mirror, you're blind to your own spiritual pimples and moles. Like chemo and radiation therapy, God's painful gifts are a radical treatment for your malignant self-centeredness (2 Corinthians 3:18). Greater compassion for others has emerged in the wake of my pain and a different ministry direction.

Jesus learned obedience by the things He suffered (Hebrews 5:8). Before you share His glory, you share His sufferings (Romans 8:17). We can't compare those sufferings to the glory that God will reveal in us (Romans 8:18). Your pain helps others experience that same glory.

How does the truth of God allowing us to hurt to help others run against the current of worldly values? Read Acts 28.

118 Why Bad Things Happen to Good People

Life-shattering events eventually strike you like lightning bolts from a cobalt blue sky. There's no easy explanation. On one hand, you have the destructiveness of the world system, human sinfulness, and Satan. On the other hand, you have God's control and His working all things for good (Romans 8:28). In the debris-choked wake of evil, it's more profitable to consider how to respond than why this awful thing happened. You must keep on trusting God's goodness, obey Him, and imitate Him by doing good yourself. Jesus summed it up as loving God with all your being and loving your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37–39).

The Lord alone is good in all His ways (1 Chronicles 16:34, Matthew 19:17). His will is good and perfect (Romans 12:2). Because of your sinful nature, you're not inherently good (Romans 3:12, 7:18). Because of God's goodness, somehow, even pain level 10 circumstances will result in good for you and others. It must frustrate the enemy!

Suffering, though I hate it, has made me a more compassionate person. It has led me to examine myself and refocus on seeking God and doing good (Psalm 34:14, Amos 5:14). God has disciplined me

for my good so I can share in His holiness (Hebrews 12:10). Suffering taught even Jesus to obey God (Hebrews 5:8).

Joseph explained his suffering as his brothers intending to harm him, but God intends it for good...the saving of many lives (Genesis 50:20). Saving lives and your holiness is more important to God than your earthly comfort. Jesus endured unimaginable pain to bring you to God (1 Peter 3:18). Your suffering always has a purpose. God allows the world system, sinful people, and the devil to inflict suffering which He reshapes for good.

How have painful things that have happened to you made you a better person?

Read Romans 1.

119 Why God Messes Up Your Plans

Faith is not believing something you know isn't true. It's not believing God will instantly deliver you from every briar patch, pothole, and sickness when you cry out to Him in prayer. Believing something doesn't make it true. If the object of your faith isn't trustworthy, you're headed for disappointment.

Biblical faith acts on God's character and promises. "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" (Hebrews 11:6, NIV). Jesus' goal was to develop faith in His followers. After He'd calmed a storm on the Sea of Galilee, He asked His disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" (Mark 4:40, NIV). How often does fear control you because you don't trust the God who is in charge?

God is at work developing faith in you. It seems the farther along the path of faith I travel, the less likely God is to give me the instant answers to the prayer of my early Christian experience. He's conforming you to the image of His Son—a person with persevering faith despite circumstances that suggest faith is foolish. Mother Teresa, for most of her life, felt God was distant or even hiding from her, yet she persevered. When circumstances go south, God wants you to trust Him.

My daughter developed an autoimmune disease in 2002 when she was a high school senior. She still has a constellation of ailments.

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She experiences pain constantly. This isn't what we'd planned for her at all. But God wants us to trust Him.

Life often messes up your plans. When that happens, remember that the One in charge knows what He's doing. "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'" (Isaiah 55:7-9, NIV). God specializes in making roses grow from manure piles of messed up plans and messed up people. Instead of becoming bitter, trust Him to work in your briar patches, potholes, and sicknesses. Thank Him for the unexpected blessings yet ahead.

*For what messed up plans in your life does God want you to trust Him?
Read Romans 2.*

Chapter 13

HIS EVIDENCE FOR YOUR FAITH

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*

PSALM 19:1 NIV

120 What Is Faith?

To have faith in something means you believe in and trust it. Faith is only as good as the trustworthiness of its object. If you trust a friend to repay a small loan but he doesn't, his failure won't ruin you. On the other hand, if you trust a wooden barrel to protect you during a plunge over Niagara Falls, you'll be disappointed to death. The barrel isn't worthy of your trust. The same is true if you trust in the untrustworthy object of your virtuous deeds to make yourself right with God. Biblical faith is not about its quantity, but its resting place—the God who is trustworthy.

Actions demonstrate biblical faith. Robert Chesebrough believed in the Vaseline he invented. He injured himself repeatedly and applied it to demonstrate its healing properties. People could see his healed wounds and realize Vaseline's value and how much he trusted it.

Those with faith in God demonstrate it by how they live. Most people (and all demons!) believe God exists (James 2:19). Like demons, few possess a "faith" that affects how they live. That's not biblical faith. Faith is more than agreeing that the Bible is true, Jesus is God's Son, and He died on the cross for the sins of the world. True believers show they love God by trusting in His character and promises and doing what He says. Meanwhile, God transforms their "ugly duckling" characters into increasingly beautiful "swans." Only obedient faith pleases God (Hebrews 11:6).

Biblical faith includes trusting your eternal destiny to Jesus alone and His finished work on the cross. You depend upon His resources to meet everyday problems. He's the same yesterday, today, and

forever (Hebrews 13:8). Circumstances change. He doesn't. Faith trusts in and acts on God's character and promises as a way of life.

When you squeeze the tube of faith, what comes out? (Galatians 5:6). So, how will you know your faith is growing? Read Romans 3.

121 Why I Believe in the Resurrection

Without Jesus' resurrection, Christianity collapses and the church's existence makes no sense. It began only after His resurrection. It would be foolish to begin a religion based on the easily disprovable resurrection of George Washington. Jesus' tomb was empty. No one could find His dead body.

Jesus' resurrection is why Sunday is the Christian day of worship. The first Christians were all Jews. For them, Saturday, not Sunday, was special. His resurrection triggered the shift.

The New Testament contains six independent testimonies of the resurrection. Three are by eyewitnesses (Matthew, John, and Peter). Paul's writings about it suggest people widely accepted it as a fact in the 50s and 60s A.D. No shred of evidence suggests these six writers made it all up.

The earliest explanation of the resurrection was that Jesus' disciples stole the body. They would have gained absolutely nothing by making up a resurrection story. They lost their lives by sticking with it. People don't die for telling a lie they know is a lie. The disciples utterly believed in the resurrection. It transformed them from cowardly hidiers into bold preachers.

Jewish or Roman authorities didn't move Jesus' body. They would've produced it to squash the preaching that Jesus had risen. They didn't because they couldn't.

The women who first saw the empty tomb didn't go to the wrong tomb. Joseph of Arimathea knew the right tomb (his). He would've corrected any such mistake.

Jesus didn't somehow recover from His wounds in the tomb. If He had, He'd have been a world-class liar. That's because He encouraged His followers to believe in and preach His resurrection.

Jesus' followers claimed to see Him alive from the dead. They didn't hallucinate. None of them expected Him to resurrect. Jesus had to convince them He really was risen from the dead.

Jesus is alive to change your life today. He has changed mine! He can do the same for you!

How does the evidence for the resurrection strengthen your faith?

Read Romans 4.

122 Is the Resurrection Real?

“You’ve been duped,” a critic commented on my blog, “Why I Believe in the Resurrection.” His second comment was more caustic: “It certainly is not because you personally witnessed Jesus stepping out of the tomb or because you really know what you’re even talking about.” Is the resurrection real?

“Why I Believe in the Resurrection” highlighted only the beginning of the evidence for Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. My response back to the critic follows:

“[My belief in the resurrection] is based on the testimony of dependable witnesses, exactly the same as evidence is examined in our law courts today. See *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* by Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell. John Singleton Copley, one of the greatest legal minds in British history said, ‘I know pretty well what evidence is, and I tell you, such evidence as that for the resurrection has never broken down yet.’ I don’t have to see John Wilkes Booth shoot Abraham Lincoln to know it happened.”

It doesn’t make sense to only believe things my own eyes have seen. Imagine how the coronavirus would’ve spread if everyone behaved as usual until they met their first victim! I wouldn’t believe George Washington was the first President of the United States or that The Philippine Islands exist. I’ve never seen Washington or the Islands. Much of what you believe is based on the testimony of dependable witnesses. It’s exactly the same in the Christian faith. According to tradition, all but one of Jesus’ disciples died because they preached that Jesus had risen from the dead. People don’t die for a lie they know is a lie. By far the best explanation of their martyrs’ deaths is that they saw Jesus risen from the dead and never got over it!

The Apostle Paul writes: “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” (Romans 1:21–22, NIV).

Is the fool the one who believes in Jesus’ resurrection or the one who denies it? Why? Read Romans 5.

123 Faith and Scientific Proof

You don’t need to prove God and the Christian faith scientifically for them to be valid. The scientific method is the wrong tool. It’s like trying to tighten a screw with a hammer or measure barometric pressure with a thermometer.

The scientific method requires repeatability. To prove distilled water boils at 100 degrees centigrade at sea level, I must do multiple tests. If someone else does the same tests tomorrow, the results should be the same. Yet, most human experience isn’t repeatable. Using the scientific method, I can’t prove I ate Cheerios for breakfast forty-five days ago. I can’t prove where I was born. I can’t prove I’m a fraternal twin and born second. I can’t prove the make and model car I drove in 1992. Accurate historical accounts depend on the testimonies of dependable witnesses, not on the scientific method. Don’t conclude, however, that science and Christianity are bitter rivals.

Evidence for God surrounds us. Wernher von Braun said, “For me, the idea of a creation is not conceivable without invoking the necessity of design. One can’t be exposed to the law and order of the universe without concluding that there must be design and purpose behind it all.”¹ He also said, “My experiences with science led me to God. They challenge science to prove the existence of God. But must we really light a candle to see the sun?”²

“The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world” (Psalm 119:1–4, NIV).

“The fool [that is, one who is morally deficient] says in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Psalm 14:1, NIV, my explanation in brackets). An all-powerful God’s existence is obvious to all who don’t stubbornly refuse to see it.

*Do you see evidence of God from the design of the universe? How so?
Read Romans 6.*

124 Creation and Evolution (1)

Are creation and evolution mutually exclusive? The short answer is, “Not necessarily,” but unwarranted assumptions often dominate both sides. Christians shouldn’t assume Genesis explains creation with scientific precision. That wasn’t its purpose. For example, “kind” in Genesis doesn’t correspond to what scientists define as species. Christians shouldn’t assume God created all species just as they are now. Genesis groups all plants into just two categories—seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it (Genesis 1:11). Scientists estimate there are about 400,000 species of flowering plants.¹ Scientists know how many things work, but not why they work that way. By contrast, Christians know why God spoke the heavens and the earth into existence (He wanted a relationship with us). But they don’t know the details of how He did it. As long as Christians receive God’s word as authoritative, even though their understanding of parts of it may vary, they’re on solid ground.

Frequently, scientists come to science with atheistic assumptions. They assume they don’t need God to explain the existence of the universe. They assume miracles don’t happen. They assume the universe is a closed system of cause and effect. Nothing can interfere. These are all unprovable. Like assuming they could duplicate the Mona Lisa by an infinite number of explosions in a paint factory.

Genesis 1:12 doesn’t explain how the earth produced vegetation or how the animals appeared. A wise, good, and powerful God made the earth for human beings to enjoy and manage carefully and responsibly. Scientists should use their God-given intelligence to help people fully enjoy His creation and manage its resources wisely.

Genesis’s description of creation doesn’t require that it took place during six twenty-four-hour days. Christian interpreters have

understood these six days in various ways: As 24-hour periods. As a sequence of geological ages where each day corresponds to a geological age. As workdays for God. As a literary tool representing the week of creation as if it were a six-day period even though it wasn't. Each of these can be squared with Exodus 20:11 (NIV), "For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." Day means what it means to them in Genesis ¹.

Was creation in 4004 BC as Archbishop Ussher calculated based on the genealogies in Genesis? Not necessarily. The Hebrew word for "father" and "son" doesn't have a fixed meaning. They can refer to distant ancestors and descendants, respectively. That prevents using the genealogies in Genesis to calculate accurately the passing of time. When we eliminate unwarranted assumptions, there's far less conflict between Genesis and science than people imagine.

Do you see science as more of a blessing or a threat? Why? Read Romans 7.

125 Creation and Evolution (2)

Can you believe in divine creation, the authority of the Bible, and evolution? Many believers and unbelievers think that's like mixing oil and water. Ironically, Christians trust scientific advances for their physical ailments and technological advances to make life easier. Yet a portion of them totally rejects what science says about the beginnings of the universe and life on earth. Others, however, have a faith that embraces both science and Christianity. They think God uses evolution as an instrument in the development of life on earth.

Pastor Tim Keller believes that what current science tells us about evolution produces at least three challenges for Bible-believing Christians.¹ First, to allow for evolution, believers can't take Genesis 1 literally. Second, evolutionists such as Richard Dawkins expand the evolutionary biological process into an all-encompassing atheistic worldview. They use it to explain the meaning and purpose of life on earth and why humans behave as they do. Third, not taking Adam and Eve as historical figures threatens the authority of Romans 5 and

1 Corinthians 15. Both teach that human sinfulness traces back to humanity's connection with Adam.

Consider the first challenge. Not taking Genesis 1 literally doesn't mean you can't take any of the Bible literally. You treat the Bible as authoritative best when you understand the biblical authors as they intended. For example, you mustn't take metaphorical language literally. Jesus calls Himself the gate and invites you to enter through Him. He promises you'll find pasture. You shouldn't look for hinges on the gate or conclude you'll be eating grass (John 10:9). By contrast, Luke 1 assures you that Luke wants you to take his carefully researched account of events literally.

There's no consensus among Christians on how the biblical author wanted you to understand Genesis 1. That chapter is neither purely prose nor purely poetry. It's a mixture of the two. It repeats various statements over and over, for example, "let there be" and "it was so." That's outside the scope of merely telling you exactly what happened. You can refer to Keller's paper for other aspects of Genesis 1 that aren't typical of prose writing. There's convincing evidence the author of Genesis 1 didn't want you to take him literally. The creative events described there aren't in logical order. In Genesis 2:5 they are. Keller's conclusion is that Genesis 1 doesn't teach that creation necessarily happened in six 24-hour days. It doesn't say God did it through evolution either. God doesn't explain how He did it. It raises the possibility that the earth could be very old.

Do you believe in a young earth or old earth? Why? Read Romans 8.

126 Creation and Evolution (3)

Evolution's process of natural selection doesn't and can't explain everything about human nature. One can believe in God's use of evolution in creation without swallowing the teaching that natural selection eliminates any need for God to explain the world. That directly contradicts biblical faith.

Belief in evolution as a biological process doesn't exclude belief in a literal Adam and Eve and their historical fall into sin. Paul clearly believes that Adam and Eve were historical figures (Romans 5:12ff). Those who believe in the authority of the Bible must believe the same. If Adam is not a literal person, Paul's teaching makes no

sense— “For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:21-22, NIV).

Derek Kidner suggests that in the evolutionary process, at a point in time, God chose one man. He uniquely endowed him with His own image. That elevated him to a higher plane of life. The special creation of Eve followed that event. God placed these two in Eden as representatives of the whole human race. Others believe that Adam and Eve were the results of evolution and also the recipients of God’s image. Still, others believe that God uses evolution to develop life on earth. But He created Adam and Eve through a special act with no common ancestry with other animals. Denis Alexander summarizes five ways people understand Genesis 2–3. It could be a parable about the sinfulness of all human beings. It could be a figurative account that happened to a group of early human beings. It could be that Adam and Eve were historical figures who came about through evolutionary biological processes. It could be old earth creationism. It could also be young earth creationism.¹ None of these perfectly explains all the data. We must humbly, tentatively hold our position. We must agree to disagree cordially with those who believe the Scriptures are authoritative but interpret them differently than we do. “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law” (Deuteronomy 29:29, NIV).

What connection do you see, if any, between the biblical account of creation and the theory of evolution? Read Romans 9.

127 Is the Bible Reliable? (1)

The Bible claims to be God-breathed and useful for learning the truth (2 Timothy 3:16). It’ll last forever (Isaiah 40:8). It’s living, active, penetrating, and it judges (Hebrews 4:12). It gives spiritual life to the spiritually dead (1 Peter 1:23).

Some think the Bible is merely a human book. It’s true anyone could claim to speak for God. How do we know people didn’t just make things up and write them down? A very severe Old Testament test weeded out impostors. If a “prophet’s” prediction didn’t come true, the Jews killed that prophet (Deuteronomy 18:20).

God worked through human writers to produce the best-selling book ever written. God moved the men who moved the pens. He communicated His truth through the unique style and personality of each writer. Do you think most people prefer to live under the authority of the Bible or to decide for themselves how to live their lives? Duh! Do you think that might be why people are so committed to undermining its authority? The Bible describes life as it is. Human pride makes us think we see more clearly than it when we're actually spiritually blind.

Suppose you're feeling fine when you go to the doctor for a check-up. You expect a good report. You don't get it. After detecting something suspicious, the doctor does a biopsy and sends it to the lab. He calls seven days later and informs you of a life-threatening melanoma. You need to do something about it soon. Is it wise to put more confidence in how you feel than in the doctor's diagnosis? God's word, like a biopsy, reveals the spiritual cancer of the inner person. We naturally think our inner stuff is "sugar and spice and everything nice." God's word describes the core of our being as deceitful above all things and beyond cure (Jeremiah 17:9).

Is it wise to put more confidence in how you feel than in the diagnosis of the "Doctor"? Why? Read Romans 10.

128 Is the Bible Reliable? (2)

God isn't like a safe, nonjudgmental, all-loving Grandfather. On one hand, John 3:16 records that God loves people enough to sacrifice His Son's life to save them. On the other hand, Hebrews 10:31 (NIV) says, "It's a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." This verse describes the fate of those who haven't accepted God's offer of forgiveness. Is it wise to put more confidence in how you feel than in the diagnosis of the "Doctor"? Accurate understandings of God's nature, promises, and expectations are important.

The Old Testament has thirty-nine books. Moses wrote the first five more than 3,000 years ago. We don't know the human authors of them all. God both inspired and protected the writing of these books and superintended their collection. The human authors wrote them in Hebrew or Aramaic, mostly Hebrew. Malachi wrote the last one about 430 B.C. The Old Testament, therefore, was written and

collected over a period of about 1,000 years.

The New Testament includes twenty-seven books. Apostles or men closely connected with them wrote the original documents in Greek. The first books written were James and Galatians about A. D. 50. The last was Revelation about A. D. 95. Human authors wrote the New Testament over a period of about 45 years.

They wrote them on perishable materials. Therefore, we have only copies of copies. Experts date the earliest surviving New Testament fragment about A. D. 130.¹ The Bodmer Library in Geneva, Switzerland, has copies from the late 100s and early 200s.² Over the centuries people copied and recopied the books of the Bible. That doesn't mean they're error-laden and undependable.

Two tests measure the reliability of a copy of ancient writing. The shorter the time between the original and the oldest existing copy the less chance for error. The number of copies is also important. Multiple copies help experts detect and eliminate copying errors. Based on these two tests, the New Testament is far more dependable than any other ancient writing.³ For other ancient works, 900–1400 years separate the originals and the oldest existing manuscripts. Only a few hundred years separate the originals and the oldest copies of the New Testament. Instead of the usual 10–15 manuscripts of ancient classics, over 5,000 manuscripts contain at least part of the New Testament.⁴ If you discard the Bible on the trash heap as too error-laden to trust, you must deposit all other ancient literature there as well.

How does the Bible's passing these two reliability tests with excellence make you feel? Read Romans 11.

129 Is the Bible Reliable? (3)

The Bible is a unified book. It's unique. Although forty authors wrote it over a 1500-year period, it's a single book. The door between the two testaments is open. Genesis begins with the creation of heaven and earth. Revelation, the last book, ends with the creation of the new heavens and new earth. In the New Testament Christ fulfills the Old Testament roles performed by the prophet, priest, and king. His New Testament crucifixion eliminated the necessity of the repeated sacrifices described in the Old Testament. His giving of the Holy

Spirit fulfills the prophet's prediction. God would write His law on the hearts of His people (Jeremiah 31:31–34).

The Bible foretells the future. Christ fulfilled over 350 Old Testament prophecies (<http://www.bibleprobe.com/300great.htm>). For example, He'd be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2 and Matthew 2:1–6). God would raise Him from the grave (Psalm 16:10, Matthew 28:10).

Jesus held a lofty view of the authority of the Old Testament. In Matthew 22:29 (NIV) He said, “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.” In John 10:35 (NIV) He said, “... the Scripture cannot be broken....” In Matthew 5:17–18 (NIV) He said that He didn't come to abolish the Law or the Prophets [the Old Testament] but to fulfill them. He said that “not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”

Jesus' opinions about the Scriptures are supremely important if He is God, as He claimed. His identity rests on a historical event. He's declared to be the Son of God by His resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:4).

Lord Darling, a former Chief Justice of England, brought a legal perspective to the evidence for the resurrection. He concluded, “There exists such overwhelming evidence, positive and negative, factual and circumstantial, that no intelligent jury in the world could fail to bring in a verdict that the resurrection story is true.”¹

Jesus' followers claimed He talked with them after He'd risen from the dead (Acts 1:3). Were they all liars and fools? Tradition holds that enemies of the faith killed all Jesus' disciples except John for preaching a resurrected Christ. Would you die for what you know is a lie? Would they? What, if anything, would Jesus' disciples gain from inventing and then sticking to a resurrection story?

If Jesus rose from the dead and also believed the Old Testament was God's Word, how does that influence your opinion about the Scriptures?

Read Romans 12.

130 Is the Bible Reliable? (4)

Some portions of the Bible are puzzling. How do you treat them? Bishop H. C. G. Moule said that because Christ absolutely trusted the Bible, he also reverently trusts in it despite the

difficulties.¹ Time and further study often eventually explain troublesome passages. Treat difficult biblical passages like a fish with bones. Don't choke on them! Just pick the meat away from them! Someday the "bones" might turn out to be as nourishing as the rest. This principle, that I don't have to understand now everything the Bible says, helps me deal with difficult passages.

Why couldn't former President of the United States Bill Clinton get away with a claim that he had a completely unblemished record? He can't because too many people are still alive who remember his moral failures. Matthew, Mark, and Luke wrote their Gospels while people still lived who had witnessed the things Jesus said and did. That included those who were bitter enemies of the faith. They would have certainly questioned any false or exaggerated statements. What does the absence of any such challenge suggest?

The Bible is an immensely profitable book. It equips believers for every good work. It's an authority on what to believe and how to live. It teaches that loving is better than hating. Forgiving is better than retaliating. It emphasizes giving more than receiving. Living in harmony with its teaching produces a deep sense of satisfaction and fulfillment.

Former British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin said, "The Bible is a high explosive. But it works in strange ways and no living man can tell or know how that book, in its journey through the world, has startled the individual soul in ten thousand different places into a new life, a new world, a new belief, a new conception, a new faith."²

How do you explain the vast life-changing influence of the Bible throughout history? Read Romans 13.

131 Shells of Remembrance

As shells go, they're nothing special. They're underwhelmingly ordinary. As motivational reminders, they're overwhelmingly extraordinary. They rest on my dresser. They frequently remind me of a day at a South Carolina discipleship conference near the seashore. God showed up there in an unexpected way. He encouraged me with the nuclear fuel of hope.

I won't detail the events of that day. I'll only say that they're the ultimate cause of my present ministry in retirement. God has

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sporadically punctuated my life in unexpected ways. I'm guessing you can say the same. Sometimes years pass between His supernatural commas, periods, or exclamation marks.

The children of Israel spent 40 years wandering in the desert. God fed them with manna. He kept their clothes from wearing out and their feet from swelling (Deuteronomy 8:3–4). These daily desert miracles became ho-hum. God noticed. The Israelites crossed the Jordan River at flood stage on dry ground. God told them to carry twelve stones from the riverbed to make a memorial. It was to remind them of His supernatural intervention (Joshua 4). He did this “so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and so that you might always fear the LORD your God” (Joshua 4:24, NIV).

You don't have stones piled up in your living room. I doubt that you have seashells on top of your dresser to remind you of God's work in your life. I suggest, however, that you reflect on ways and times God has intervened in your life. Select your own “shells of remembrance” so you don't forget them.

What “shells of remembrance” can remind you how God has intervened in your life? Read Romans 14.

Chapter 14

HIS HUMILITY FOR YOUR PRIDE

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.

MATTHEW 11:29 NIV

132 U-Turn Victories

A U-turn represents a path to victory. I concluded that after a devotional reading of Exodus 10. This chapter details the locust plague which was part of the ten plagues God brought to Egypt.

In the account of the plagues you read repeatedly that Pharaoh hardened his heart and refused to submit to God's command to let His people go. "... His heart was unyielding, and he would not let the people go" (Exodus 9:7, NIV). Exodus 10:3 (NIV) reveals the underlying issue. God asks, "How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me?" The Israelites knew they were slaves in Egypt. Pharaoh was a slave to his own pride, but he didn't know it. No one was going to tell him what to do! Do you act like Pharaoh in conflict situations? My automatic response in conflict is too often pride-driven. There's a way of escape.

A U-turn represents a humble heart yielded to God's leadership. Like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, the humble heart says, "May your will be done" (Matthew 26:42). That's part of loving God and people. An ongoing attitude of repentance produces a humble, submissive heart. A U-turn represents a 180-degree turn from your natural pride-driven desire to control your own life. Hard hearts and blinded eyes travel in pairs. Repentance sets you free from both.

Is pride or humility more likely to drive your reaction in conflict? How does a U-turn from pride lead to victory? Read Romans 15.

133 Hidden Cargo

I was fishing in Lake Erie near Cedar Point Amusement Park. A sharp object on the bottom of the lake cut my fishing line. I lost my lure. A little later my anchor line went slack. I lost my anchor too. What was happening?

Unimaginable numbers of zebra and quagga mussels with razor-sharp shells plastered the lake bottom. The Great Lakes have quadrillions of them—more than 9,000 per square foot in places. They've altered the ecology of the Great Lakes more than any other living thing has in the last 10,000 years.

They're native to the basins of the Black and Caspian Seas and rivers in the former Soviet Union. Foreign ships brought them to the Great Lakes. They released their mussel-containing ballast water there. They've spread by hitch-hiking on recreational boats to other waters in the United States, including the Susquehanna River, where I usually fish.

You can see others' hidden cargo. But rarely your own. You observe their obvious "better than you" thinking and behaving. That attitude killed about six million Jews because people imagined that they were inferior. You saw it in the college admissions scandal of 2019. It's everywhere present. It criticizes, minimizes, slashes, burns, argues, lies, cheats, and steals to get what it "deserves." It puts others in their place. Like a self-justifying terrorist driving a car through a crowd, it leaves destruction in its wake. It's called pride. It leads to destruction (Proverbs 16:18). You see it everywhere but in yourself. Beware!

How does the hidden cargo of pride in your life adversely affect your ability to complete your God-given purpose? Read Romans 16.

134 Pursuing Glory

Pursuing personal glory is a distinctly human trait. Lions, tigers, and bears don't go after it. They seek dominance, not glory. Running hard after glory is a peculiarly human wish. We want others to celebrate, praise, and exalt us above other people. The demand for glory always exceeds the supply. Pursuing it spawns conflicts galore.

You chase glory primarily through achievements. I've done more than a little glory-chasing since I first wore diapers. I've been honored and celebrated enough to know it doesn't satisfy me for very long. The lack of satisfaction is a clue. God didn't create you to pursue glory through personal accomplishments. Nevertheless, like a glory addict, you frequently scheme how you can get your next fix. Typically, you accept glory from others but don't pursue the glory that comes from God (John 5:44). Underneath it all lies insecurity and the desire for others to love you as you are.

Jesus can help you manage this misdirected glory urge. You're wise if you follow His example. He didn't seek glory for Himself (John 8:50) or accept glory from human beings (John 5:41). He pursued God's glory by finishing his assigned work (John 17:4) and bearing much fruit (John 15:8). He teaches you that glory is a by-product of living a humble, obedient life. The glory you seek for yourself means nothing. Like a flower of the field or fireworks display, it quickly fades away (1 Peter 1:24). Pursing glory is good—God's glory! The glory God gives means everything (John 8:54). He will be your glory forever (Isaiah 60:19).

What will you do today to bring glory to God instead of yourself?

Read 1 Corinthians 1.

135 The Greatest of All Time

Dvora Meyers authored an article for Vice News about Simone Biles.¹ I read it because I admire Simone's gymnastic routines. She performs flawlessly moves I couldn't do in my dreams. No other female in world history has even attempted those moves in competition. She's won more world championship gymnastic medals than any other male or female. She's the greatest gymnast of all time. At four feet eight inches, her accomplishments tower above all female gymnasts. She dominates her sport as no other male or female does. If you were she, do you think that would make you happy? There's more to Dvora Meyers' story.

When you're the greatest of all time in a sport, whatever you achieve after you retire will pale in comparison. She has worked hard to stand alone in the gymnastics spotlight. The thought of what is next is unsettling. Biles said, "We almost feel like all of our life and

social skills [have been put] aside to be good at one thing, and then you put us in the real world, and we're just like, lost." The thought of life after sport's glory can be depressing. Michael Phelps, the most decorated Olympian of all time, considered suicide following his success at the 2012 London Olympics.

I'm guessing you'd like to be the greatest of all time at something. But you don't have the ability or will to accomplish it. Even if you did, you'd discover what Simone Biles, Michael Phelps, and others have. Being the greatest of all time doesn't satisfy you. Real peace, joy, and contentment require turning the desire for greatness on its head. Success isn't about making a name for yourself. It's about completing God's purpose for your life. It's about bringing Him the glory He deserves. "I'm the LORD; that is my name! I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols" (Isaiah 42:8). Jesus is the greatest of all time. He is supreme in all things (Colossians 1:18). God created you to worship, serve, and give Him glory (Revelation 14:7). People worshipping, serving, and glorifying you won't satisfy you.

How does the pursuit of personal glory hinder your purpose?

Read 1 Corinthians 2.

136 Are You Broken?

Who needs a totally wrecked car, a cell phone that flunked swimming lessons, or a worn-out windshield wiper blade? You throw away broken things.

Surprisingly, God uses broken things in his unfolding plan. He transforms stone into food-supplying soil. He uses fungi and bacteria to break down dead vegetation to enrich that rock dust. He uses the broken light of a rainbow to remind you of His covenant to never again destroy life on earth with a colossal flood (Genesis 9:13). Gideon and his three hundred men followed His plan and broke pitchers. He used the resulting pattern of light to cause their enemies to flee (Judges 7).

Jesus fed 20,000 people, including women and children, with five broken barley loaves and two fish from a boy's lunch. In the youth's hands, lunch was a meal for one. In Jesus' hands, it became a meal for a multitude. Twelve baskets of broken barley loaves were the

leftovers after everyone had eaten (John 6:1–14). A woman broke a container of precious ointment to anoint Jesus. He commended her (Matthew 26).

God used the broken body of His Son on Golgotha. It brings salvation to everyone who trusts in its adequacy to pay sin's penalty. You celebrate this salvation when you participate in the Lord's Supper. "And when he had given thanks, he [Jesus] broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:24, NIV).

God uses broken men and women. They're humble, dependent, yielded to Him, and no longer filled up with themselves and their own interests. He uses contrite, broken, weak vessels. He empowers them with His Spirit. He perfects His strength in their weak, broken places (2 Corinthians 12:9). Their light shines (Matthew 5:16). He gets the glory.

How has God used your brokenness to bring glory to Himself?

Read 1 Corinthians 3.

137 Humble Boldness

Can you be both humble and bold? Do you have to choose one or the other? Pairing humility and boldness is unexpected. It's like an Olympic swimmer who's afraid of water! An online resource lists boldness as the opposite of humility.¹

You rarely pair humility with boldness. That's because you don't understand biblical humility. Humility is the fluttering flag of freedom. It's found in the gentle land where self-centeredness, pride, and belittling oneself are aliens. Humility isn't criticizing and diminishing yourself. It's forgetting yourself. Boldness speaks the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). It acts self-sacrificially when self-focused fear begs you to do nothing.

I heard Pastor Edmund Chan speak at a gathering of pastors. He was humble boldness in the flesh. He wasn't a dynamic speaker, but his words were like arrows. His character was the bow. Humbly, he spoke hard truths in love to us pastors. Humble boldness is a vital dimension of spiritual maturity.

Jesus was both humble and bold. He described Himself as humble in heart (Matthew 11:29). He humbled Himself to die on the

cross (Philippians 2:8). He kept on speaking the truth boldly during His ministry. Even when His message offended the religious leaders of His day. They wanted to arrest Him. They recognized He spoke the parable of the tenants against them (Mark 12:12). He drove out those who were buying and selling in the temple courts. He upset the tables of the money changers. He toppled the benches of those who were selling doves (Matthew 21:12).

Spirit-filled boldness was characteristic of Jesus' humble followers (Acts 4:31, 9:28, 13:46, 14:3, 19:8, 28:31, 2 Corinthians 3:12). Humility and boldness kiss in 2 Corinthians 10:1 (NIV): "By the humility and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you—I, Paul, who am "timid" when face to face with you, but "bold" toward you when away!" The mature believer is both humble and bold. Both are the fruit of denying yourself (Luke 9:23). I need more of both. How about you?

How would more humility and boldness help you bear much fruit that will remain? Read 1 Corinthians 4.

138 Draining the Pride Pan

I was running a 600-yard race in ninth grade at a junior high track meet. I reached the home stretch. Suddenly, I realized only one runner was ahead of me. I strained to pass him and did. But my knees began to buckle with every stride. Somehow, I didn't fall. I maintained my slight lead. I crossed the finish line first. I remember raising both arms in a kind of touchdown signal. That was my first, last, and only victory on the track! I'm not criticizing celebrating victories. But what's the unseen force behind raising both arms?

That force has reemerged repeatedly. It lusts for the spotlight on life's stage. It single-mindedly seeks to enthrone me and dethrone all competitors. It focuses my resources to accomplish that goal. It cooperates with others who can help me until they can't. Like Cornelius Vanderbilt, John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, J. P. Morgan, and Henry Ford, it seeks to crush any who threaten its total domination. It causes interpersonal conflict in spades. Self-centered pride is a venomous species. It strikes any who interfere with its self-exaltation. It wants to be God. It lives in all of us.

HIS POWER FOR YOUR WEAKNESS

Self-centered pride's drain plug is gratitude. It turns your focus away from yourself. Be thankful in everything (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Such behavior recognizes it's a God-centered universe. Pointing to and looking toward heaven after a victory acknowledges your thankfulness to God. He won't share His glory with another (Isaiah 42:8). Everything you have comes from Him (1 Chronicles 29:14). Allow God to be God in your life. Give Him the gratitude and credit He deserves.

Feeling superior to others demonstrates pride. In what areas of your life does that attitude reign? Read 1 Corinthians 5.

Chapter 15

HIS REMINDERS FOR YOUR FORGETFULNESS

and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

JAMES 1:24 NIV

139 Container Christianity

Sometimes grow bags shine. Sometimes they don't. A zucchini planted in my garden plot produces significantly more than one plant in a grow bag. On the other hand, consider grape tomatoes planted in grow bags on my concrete porch. They're far less prone to disease than those planted in my blight-spore-infested garden. In 2019, those planted in the garden died by August 1st. Those on the porch bore tomatoes into November. Where you plant seeds can make a significant difference.

Where your faith is rooted matters. I planted grape tomato seeds in March 2018, in three-inch-diameter pots filled with potting soil. The soil was fertile, but there wasn't enough of it to feed a mature tomato plant. I transplanted the seedlings into four twenty-inch diameters grow bags filled with nutrient-rich compost, perlite, peat moss, and fertilizer. I harvested more than two thousand grape tomatoes from those four plants in 2018.

Christianity is like container gardening. "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Corinthians 4:7, NIV). Your faith doesn't thrive in the 3-inch-diameter pot of mere regular church attendance. You need the 20-inch containers filled with the nutrient-rich compost of daily time in the Bible. You need the perlite of daily prayer. You can't neglect the peat moss of regular fellowship with other believers. You thrive on the fertilizer of sharing your faith with others. Bearing much fruit brings glory to your Father in heaven and demonstrates you're following Jesus (John 15:8).

You bear more spiritual fruit when you continually nourish your faith. What is the next step you need to take to do that? Read 1 Corinthians 6.

140 Green Ice Parable

The variety of lettuce seeds I plant illustrates a serious life lesson. It's called "Green Ice." One day I saw a piece missing from a lettuce leaf. Then, I saw a half-inch-long worm eating that leaf. Left to chomp its way unhindered, it would've destroyed the plant. Seconds after I saw it, that worm was no longer a resident of my county!

So, what's the serious life lesson? Destructive worms relentlessly squeeze into your life through cracks in your self-control. They're not friends despite their initial attractiveness. They're like thieves who come to steal and kill and destroy (John 10:10, NIV).

In 1981 I played my brother's track and field computer game for more than three hours straight. What's the problem? It was instant addiction. I recognized my weakness regarding that kind of entertainment. I haven't played a single video game since that day. I'm free to play (no law against it). But I choose not to, lest it controls me (1 Corinthians 6:12). That devouring worm won't have its way with me.

Ignoring the worms in your life can lead to catastrophic consequences. Daily, people text while driving, resulting in vehicular homicide and/or premature death. Every day people kill themselves and/or others while driving under the influence of alcohol. A friend who ignored a worm in his life for years found his legacy recast in one tragic moment. He moved from being a beloved pastor and teacher to multiple charges of child pornography. If only he'd crushed that worm when it was small and vulnerable. Yours is not to throw stones at others. It's to crush the worms in your own life. Remember the Green Ice parable. Crush the worms before they crush you!

What controlling worms in your life do you need to crush today? How will you do it? Read 1 Corinthians 7.

141 God's Whittling Knife

Trusting God is an internal tug-of-war. During adversity, faith and fear pull you in opposite directions. Will you trust God in the middle of an overwhelming problem? Will fear render you helpless,

hopeless, and paralyzed? God uses adverse and favorable circumstances to evaluate and strengthen your faith.

A faith test unfolds in Mark 4:35–41. Consider what happened before Jesus calmed a storm on the Sea of Galilee. He told His disciples that they were all going to the other side (verse 35). On their way, a furious storm exploded on them. Monstrous waves broke over and filled the boat. The storm seemed to be in charge. Jesus' disciples rebuked Him in verse 38. He didn't seem to care about the storm. To the panicky, those who trust appear apathetic.

Jesus' disciples forgot He'd said they were going to the other side. Their doubts and fears displaced their trust in His words. In verse 40, Jesus asked why they were so afraid. Where was their faith? In a crisis, you easily forget that Jesus is Lord. You don't recall that all things work together for your good (Romans 8:29). You don't remember that God didn't spare His own Son. He delivered Him up for you. That guarantees every lesser gift needed for life and godliness (Romans 8:32). God can camouflage His best gifts in a crisis. He uses circumstances to shape you.

From your perspective, your choices shape your destiny. But God knew that destiny before the creation of the world. From your point of view, certain circumstances that led to decision A, in turn, led to decision B which led to C....

God's focus is on the person you're becoming. The people you meet, and the events of each day aren't random. God is shaping you to be more like Jesus. He has used circumstances since the beginning of time to move history according to His purposes. He will graciously use you in the process. That's why you can give thanks to Him in all circumstances.

What circumstances has God used to make you more like Jesus?

Read 1 Corinthians 8.

142 No Signal

When I blocked my dad's line of sight, he'd say, "You make a better door than a window." I remembered that recently while I was eating breakfast. Our kitchen TV isn't on cable. Reception depends on audio and video waves transmitted through the air. They're easily blocked. My daughter was blocking the signal while working at the

kitchen counter. I was trying to watch the news. “No Signal” appeared on the screen. She was a better blocker than a transmitter!

When it comes to transmitting God’s messages, I’m sometimes a better blocker than a transmitter. The message of God at work in me should be love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. All these should flow from me like a pure, refreshing mountain stream (Galatians 5:22–23, NIV). It doesn’t always happen. Self-absorption pollutes or totally dries up those messages—no signal! In my heart, I want to be God’s 24-7 transmitter. But I also want to do my own thing. When I do—no signal! I’m assigned to pass on the life-giving Gospel message to others who can pass it on to others (2 Timothy 2:2). When I become preoccupied with lesser things—no signal! I’m to implore people on Christ’s behalf to be God’s friends (2 Corinthians 5:20, NIV). When I remain silent because of fear of what they might think—no signal! God prompts me to sacrificially love others by giving my time, talents, treasures, and energy to meet their needs. But if I have a “better” idea—no signal! I want to be a better transmitter! How about you? Let’s stay connected to the source of the signal (John 15:5). No signal living is living in vain.

In what situations are you most likely to demonstrate no signal living? How can you change that? Read 1 Corinthians 9.

143 A Cup of God’s Grace

Imagine a cup that represents your life. It’s inverted because you live with morally and spiritually upside-down values. You don’t love God and put Him first. You think of yourself first. You go your own way. You do your own thing. You live as if God doesn’t exist. Your downward focus is on the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16). Your understanding of spiritual realities, great or small, doesn’t affect how you live. Even if God tried to rain down his blessings on you, your upside-down cup is in no position to receive them.

God works in your heart. You come to your senses (Luke 15:17). You decide to flip your cup. It often occurs when you’re desperate—coupled with a new understanding of the perils of your rebellious condition. You can’t flip your cup without God’s enabling grace

(Ephesians 2:8–9). You decide to go God’s way instead of your own. Your downward/inward focus slowly changes. Progressively it becomes more upward and outward. Flipping your cup (repentance) is the necessary first step. It puts you in a position to receive God’s blessings and to bear spiritual fruit (Matthew 3:8, John 15:8). The process of conforming to the image of Jesus begins (Romans 8:29).

You become more like Jesus by thinking more as He does. You see the world with new eyes. You love with a new heart. His Son fills your cup (Colossians 2:9–10), His word (Colossians 3:16), His Spirit (Ephesians 5:18), faith (Acts 6:5), and Christian fellowship (Hebrews 10:24–25) become priorities. You joyfully serve others. You share with them what God is pouring into your life. Trials, losses, disappointments, and heartaches drill holes into your cup. You love best when God’s love pours out of those holes. You’re a wounded healer and limping lover.

God’s grace equips you to love sacrificially (Matthew 20:28), bring good news (Luke 4:18–19), be good news (John 10:10), and explain His ways to others. God created you to serve Him, your neighbor, other believers, and your enemies (Matthew 22:37–39; John 13:34–35, Matthew 5:44). Upside down cup—flipped cup—filled cup—leaking cup—all by God’s grace!

*How has adversity equipped you to pour out God’s grace and love to others?
Read 1 Corinthians 10.*

144 Never Quit

Persevering people endure and don’t turn back as many of Jesus’ disciples did (John 6:66). Perseverance trusts and obeys Jesus despite unending resistance. It strains to finish the race despite exhaustion. It plods on despite voices within and without that scream, “Stop!” Because you’re uncomfortable, unappreciated, unrecognized, unproductive, unsafe, unrewarded or your service is unsustainable, you’ll consider quitting. Don’t.

You naturally desire comfort and pleasant circumstances. Everyone does. Unfortunately, God doesn’t promise a road with no potholes. Instead, He comforts you in the midst of adversity in the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4) through His promises (Psalm 119:50) and unfailing love (Psalm 119:76).

You'll want to quit because others don't appreciate what you're doing. God cares about both how you serve Him and why. One "Well done!" from Him more than makes up for a lifetime of unnoticed service (Matthew 25:21). Only His appreciation matters.

You might want to quit because your service brings no recognition. Jesus recognizes humble servants, who, like Him, live to serve (Matthew 20:26–28).

You might want to give up because you aren't making any difference. "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9, NIV). You're responsible to sow. God is responsible for the harvest.

Don't stop living for Jesus because it's unsafe. Here and now, it might be. But it's the safest thing you can do for the long haul. "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Mark 8:36–37).

Feeling unrewarded tempts you to quit serving. Remember Whom you're serving! "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" (Colossians 3:23–24, NIV).

You might want to quit because you think you can't sustain a life of self-sacrifice indefinitely. You can (Philippians 4:13). It's the only kind of life that brings soul-deep satisfaction (John 10:10)!

What most frequently tempts you to quit following Jesus?

Read 1 Corinthians 11.

145 Which Garden Are You Tending?

Like political kingpins, vegetable gardens have enemies. I've battled slugs, cutworms, cucumber bugs, squash bugs, aphids, cabbage worms, harlequin bugs, zucchini worms, tomato hornworms, carrot weevils, and carrot root flies. I've fought tomato blight, powdery mildew, brown spots, blossom end rot, sunscald, and anthracnose. I've struggled with weeds, frost, windstorms, and drought. Deer, groundhogs, squirrels, and rabbits have come uninvited to my garden table.

HIS POWER FOR YOUR WEAKNESS

Producing spiritual fruit is even more challenging than harvesting homegrown vegetables. The parable of the Sower describes fruit-opposing forces (Matthew 13:1–23).

In Matthew 13:18–23, Jesus explains the deeper meaning of the birds eating up the seed sown along the path. The evil one snatches away God’s word sown in hearts (v. 19). That word makes absolutely no sense to them. It leaves no tracks in their hearts. They hear it on May 29th. By May 30th it’s gone. The devil erases it. No comprehension. No obedience. No fruit.

God’s word falling on rocky soil illustrates those who joyfully receive the word initially. But then they turn back and go their own way when they encounter trouble or persecution (v. 21). The seed is sown on May 29th. It germinates on June 2nd. It looks healthy for a while. It never blossoms. It never produces fruit. Partial comprehension. Conditional following. No fruit.

God’s word falling among thorns describes those who don’t bear fruit. The worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth distract and preoccupy them. They never get around to the main things—loving God and others (v. 22). The seed is sown on May 29th. It germinates on June 2nd and grows for a while. But misdirected energy and priorities utterly crush any chance of its bearing fruit.

The devil designed the world system. It provides what the flesh wants and resists what the Holy Spirit wants. It caters to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16). Yielding to its temptations derails you from the straight and narrow track.

Finally, to bear spiritual fruit you must overcome one more formidable foe. Your sinful nature persistently resists God’s will. It’s self-sufficient, self-seeking, and self-satisfied. It’s self-directed and self-destructive. Your garden and your glory compete with God’s garden and God’s glory. You only have time to tend one garden. The choice is yours.

What are encouraging signs of spiritual fruit in your life?

Read 1 Corinthians 12.

146 Your Homework

In prayer, my pastor referred to the beautiful sanctuary in which we were worshipping that Sunday morning when the theme was “focus.” That got me thinking.

I thought about my house. People in the United States have spent considerable money during the pandemic to make their houses more beautiful. My father taught me to focus more on function than appearance. A house is a shelter from the elements, not a means to impress others. A house requires upkeep, but that housework is not your homework.

I thought about church buildings. Commonly, sanctuaries in the United States have stained glass windows, beautiful pews, and impressive pulpits. Contrary to popular opinion, the bethel in which your worship isn’t God’s house. Its upkeep diminishes the congregation’s ability to minister to others. As many as one in five churches will permanently close in less than two years because of the realities of Covid-19.¹ A bethel requires upkeep, but that housework is not your homework.

I thought about a beautiful house Covid-19 can’t destroy. It’s the real church. It’s an incredibly diverse collection of Jesus’ followers all around the world throughout all time. They’re the living stones God uses to build a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:1–25). It’s constructed on a chosen and precious living Cornerstone, Jesus Christ. That house is God’s primary focus and should be yours as well. You beautify it by not conforming to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. You make it more attractive by setting yourself apart to God and His purposes (1 Peter 1:14–15). You make it more winsome when you sincerely love other “stones” in that house (1 Peter 1:22). You adorn it by ridding yourself of all malice and deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander (1 Peter 2:1). The more pure spiritual milk (God’s word) you consume and apply, the more beautiful you make it! (1 Peter 2:2). That housework is your homework.

*How can housework interfere with the homework that really matters?
Read 1 Corinthians 13.*

147 Warning Wise

One day, I slept until 6:00 a.m. for the first time in years. I awoke to an unfamiliar sound. I finally traced it to a clock. The alarm was ringing. I'd never intentionally set it. Somehow it was set for 6:00 a.m. It could have rung at that time every day for years! No one had heard it. No one had been in the bedroom at 6:00 a.m. for a long time.

That got me thinking about warnings I ignore. A fishing equipment catalog contains the following: "Warning: The following products can expose you to chemicals such as lead, which is known to the State of California to cause cancer and birth defects or other reproductive harm." It contains another warning about using products that can expose me to DEHP and DINP. I pay no attention to those warnings. I use the products anyway. That's just the beginning of the warnings I ignore. I'm pretty sure you do the same thing!

Why do you do that? It's because you're special and those warnings don't really apply to you, right? You function as if they don't. The message of multiple Old Testament prophets to the people of Israel (and you) reduces to one word. Repent (for example, Ezekiel 14:6). That is, give up your ways for God's ways. The consequences of ignoring God's warnings are severe. I'll still ignore the fishing catalog warnings, but I'm taking God's warnings more seriously. How about you?

How can thinking that warnings don't apply to you get you in trouble with God? Read 1 Corinthians 14.

148 The Incredible Edible Story

The Lord's Supper reflects the whole gospel. It reminds you how you got where you are. You were stubborn as a Missouri mule. You lived for yourself. You rebelled against or ignored your heavenly Father. By all rights, He should've written you off. However, He doesn't want you to reap the fruit of your foolishness. His love for you remains unfailing (John 3:16). He provides a way of escape (Romans 5:8).

The bread and cup explain how God could legally forgive you. He gives only good and perfect gifts (James 1:17). His best gift releases you from sin's penalty and power. But it cost Him dearly—His Son's death instead of yours. The bread and cup symbolize God's commitment to you. The breaking of the bread represents the bruising, crushing, and wounding of Jesus for your sins (Isaiah 53:5). The cup reminds you that God justly forgave your sins through the shedding of Jesus' blood as your substitute (Hebrews 9:22).

God provides in Jesus all the resources you need to overcome the downward pull of the world, flesh, and devil. He's the power and wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24). He's the bread of life (John 6:35). He gives life and is your life (Galatians 2:20). He's the bread from heaven that provides spiritual strength to do the Father's will.

The Lord's Supper reminds you that when Christ died on the cross, so did you (Galatians 2:20). God's purpose was that you may live a new life and no longer be a slave to sin (Romans 6:4–6).

The Lord's Supper is an opportunity to thank God. When Jesus instituted the Supper, He gave thanks for the bread and cup (Matthew 26:26–27). Meditating on what Jesus has delivered you from stirs flickering coals of gratitude into flame. Jesus is still setting you free from all that keeps you from being like Him. He's given you a purpose and hope! Give thanks!

Eating one loaf with other believers demonstrates that you're one body (1 Corinthians 10:16–17). You're united with Christ and with other Christians. Your relationships with them should reflect oneness. Live interdependently. You're all part of Jesus' team!

What has following Christ cost you in recognition, praise, esteem, respect, comfort, and financial rewards you might otherwise have achieved?

Read 1 Corinthians 15.

149 Baptism

Water baptism isn't an indifferent matter. It isn't essential for salvation. God saved the criminal on the cross apart from it (Luke 23:39–43). Nevertheless, F.F. Bruce, a New Testament scholar, wrote, "The idea of an unbaptized Christian is simply not entertained in the New Testament."¹

HIS POWER FOR YOUR WEAKNESS

Does salvation depend on baptism? Yes. Do you have to be baptized in water for God to save you? No. The baptism that's essential is described in 1 Corinthians 12:12–13 (NIV): “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.”

Water baptism isn't necessary for salvation, but it's vitally important. Jesus commanded it in Matthew 28:18–20. Baptism is your public identification with Jesus and His church. It advertises that you're following Jesus. The experience of the thief on the cross is the exception to the rule. The Apostle Paul expected only baptized Christians (Galatians 3:27; 1 Corinthians 1:13; 12:13). There was no other kind.

Baptism symbolizes the death and burial of the old self-centered life and the resurrection to new life. “We were therefore buried with him 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” (Romans 6:4, NIV). Baptism is your public testimony. You're renouncing your old life of self-centeredness. You're identifying yourself with Christ. You're following Him in the fullness of strength which He provides.

Immersion was the mode of baptism for at least the first one hundred years of the faith. In the middle of the second century, pouring is an option for baptism if better options aren't available. The earliest account of the mode of baptizing is in the Didache: “Now concerning baptism, thus baptize ye: having first uttered all these things baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, in living water. But if thou hast not living water, baptize in other water; and if thou canst not in cold, then in warm. But if thou hast neither, pour water upon the head thrice in the name of the Father, and Son, and Holy Ghost.”²

Have you been baptized? If not, when will you take your public stand with Jesus? Read 1 Corinthians 16.

Chapter 16

HIS LIFE FOR YOUR OBEDIENCE

In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.

JOHN 1:4 NIV

150 Obedience

A relationship with God isn't complicated. You don't have to dig a hole 1000 feet deep with a teaspoon. You don't have to climb a ladder forty-nine miles into the atmosphere to stay on His good side. You need to know what He has said, believe it, and do it.

Rule #1 of the Christian life is that God's will takes priority over yours and everyone else's. Sometimes you'll hate that rule! It will take a while to adjust to it. Don't try to rationalize your way around it. Your situation isn't special. Rule #1 has no loopholes. You can't appeal it to a higher authority.

Rule #1 challenges your willful desire to be in charge. To obey God, you must die to your own agenda (Luke 9:23). That's not hard until you want to go shopping or fishing or whatever, and God wants you to do something else.

God has chosen you and all other believers for obedience to Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:2). Peter describes the righteous as obedient children (1 Peter 1:14). Believing children are obedient children. True repentance produces obedience. That's why Jesus said in Matthew 7:21, NIV "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."

Whomever you obey defines who your father is. It's either God or Satan (John 8:31-47). Everyone is a slave. People are tragically deceived. They think they're in charge of their own life. Actually, they're marching in lockstep with millions of others to the beat of Satan's drums. You serve either sin or obedience (Romans 6:16). Those who believe in Jesus as Forgiver and Leader show it by their obedience. God connects belief and obedience.

Sometimes in Scripture, you find the word obedience when you'd expect the word belief. Hebrews 5:8–9 (NIV) speak of Jesus: “Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.” John 3:36 (NIV) says, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them.” The Greek word translated in the NIV as “rejects” means, one who is not subject to, is being stubborn toward, resists, or disobeys the Son. God connects belief and obedience. He also connects unbelief and disobedience.¹

How do you show most clearly that you believe in Jesus?

Read 2 Corinthians 1.

151 Got Connections?

Connections make a gigantic difference. I once replaced our stove's burners and the deteriorating pans underneath them. That improved the stove's appearance. The first time I tried to use the burner, it didn't produce any heat. It was room temperature. It looked better than the old burner. But it didn't work because I didn't connect it properly.

I got my summer job with the Pennsylvania Fish Commission through connections my father had. That job opened the door for eventual full-time employment with the PFC. Connections often open employment doors for average students that exceptional students can't budge. They don't even know they exist.

Your spiritual health is also about connections. As a teenager, I was to a church pew what an unconnected burner is to a stove. I looked good. I was usually well-behaved during the hour I was there. But I wasn't connected to God's life. My spiritual passion was room temperature. I had a “This can't be over too soon!” attitude.

When I was twenty, God used relationships I had to motivate me to reconsider Jesus. I entered the family of the One who created me and died on the cross to remove every

barrier keeping me from connecting to Him. “Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (John 1:12–13, NIV). Connection with God has made a gigantic, life-transforming difference!

How will your connection with God change how you think, feel, and behave today? Read 2 Corinthians 2.

152 Pine Tree Parable

I saw it. A pine tree was growing out of granite on the shoreline of Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire. Against all odds, life found a way. A little seed produced a small tree. The tree was much older than its size suggested. The living invaded the non-living and prevailed. It remained through wind, hail, rain, snow, sleet, summer’s sizzle, and winter’s deep freeze. It was gloriously tenacious.

That tree emerged from a single pine seed. Likewise, every Christian receives God’s life from the seed of His word. “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Peter 1:23, NIV). That new life is gloriously tenacious. It provides spiritual resources you can’t even imagine.

Your natural desire is for life to be about you. The seed’s life is about God and His purposes. Like the granite in which that tree grew, you too often resist the maturity that new life seeks to bring. Your self-centeredness controls you. Thoughtless, cutting words tumble from your lips. Misdeeds still haunt you. Relationships are fractured. Hurtful habits and familiar, unproductive routines shackle you. Be encouraged. “Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6, NIV). God’s life in you is gloriously tenacious. It will prevail!

What area of your life still offers granite resistance to the growth of God’s life in you? How will you change that? Read 2 Corinthians 3.

153 God's Favorite Perfume

In 2023 people will pay almost sixty-four billion dollars to smell good.¹ Meanwhile, people like me, will be content merely not to smell bad. If I smell good, my wife will feel bad! Not everyone enjoys fragrances wafting on the morning breezes. My wife is allergic to the scents of perfumes and flowers. She gets unscented everything, including her husband!

God's favorite fragrance doesn't come in a bottle. It's not the sweet aroma of chocolate in Hershey, PA. It's not the pleasant smell of a prize rose in Hershey Gardens. It's sweet-smelling obedience. It willingly, cheerfully makes love-motivated sacrifices for Him and others. In Numbers 15 you read six times that the people's sacrifices are an "aroma pleasing to the LORD." Attitude is critical. Sacrifices offered grudgingly are more skunk-like than Chanel-like. Animal sacrifices prefigured the once for all willing sacrifice His Son was yet to make. He did it to offer forgiveness and eternal life. To people from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

Presenting your body as a living sacrifice pleases God. It's true and proper worship (Romans 12:1). A cheerful, willing sacrifice for God and others is His favorite perfume by far. It's the fragrance of Christ No. 1. It imitates the ultimate sacrifice His own Son made to save you from eternal pain. As you make sacrifices to follow God's path, you give Him pleasure. You experience it yourself. In a mysterious way, your sacrifices become to others the pleasing aroma of Christ No. 1 (2 Corinthians 2:14–16). Christ No. 1 smells far better to God than Chanel No. 5!

When did sacrifices you've made for God and others bring you joy?

Read 2 Corinthians 4.

154 God's Obedience Tests

God's obedience tests are often like a Comma butterfly. The Comma butterfly in Great Britain hibernates among dead leaves. It's nearly invisible. It blends into its background. Obedience tests often blend into the background of your day. Unexceptional moments surround them. Suddenly, the decisive moment appears out of nowhere. It's good to be more prepared for them than I was.

I was grocery shopping with two other family members. A young girl was pushing a cart near us. Somehow she managed to spill about twenty items from the cart onto the floor. I should've immediately helped her and her mother pick them up. I felt the urge to do it. But I didn't. I allowed an opportunity to love my neighbor as myself slip away.

God punctuates your life with obedience tests. He left some of the residents of Canaan unconquered "to test the Israelites to see whether they would obey the LORD's commands, which he had given their ancestors through Moses" (Judges 3:4, NIV). Would they love Him enough to obey Him?

"If you love me, keep my commands" (John 14:15, NIV). Do you love God and others enough to sacrifice your time, talents, treasures, and energy for their benefit? You must act decisively, or your faith will remain invisible. Hopefully, the regret of my missed opportunity will spur me during future service opportunities. And, yes, obedience tests are faith tests too. You often feel inadequate to meet a need. Nevertheless, you must step out depending on God's resources to be enough (2 Corinthians 12:9). Heads up! Obedience tests are coming your way!

When did an obedience test last appear unexpectedly? How did you respond? Read 2 Corinthians 5.

155 Is God Just a Facebook Friend?

People have hundreds or even thousands of Facebook friends. But British anthropologist Robin Dunbar says you can maintain only five close friendships at a time.¹ Most Facebook friendships are superficial. You don't know what problems rob your friends' of sleep. You don't know what dreams inspire them. You aren't aware of what burdens weigh down their hearts. Facebook relationships are more about impressing than supporting. You show the frontstage of your life but not the backstage. You advertise beauty and success. You hide ugliness and failure.

The Babylonians were threatening to capture and destroy Jerusalem. Zedekiah was the king of Judah. Notice that "Neither he nor his attendants nor the people of the land paid any attention to the words the LORD had spoken through Jeremiah the prophet"

(Jeremiah 37:2, NIV). The Jews of that day had a superficial relationship with God. King Zedekiah wanted Jeremiah to pray to God. He wanted Him to deliver them from the Babylonians (Jeremiah 37:3). But he and the people of the land had no interest in following God's words and ways. They had a Facebook relationship with God. They hardly knew Him. They ignored Him until they were in trouble. Does that sound familiar?

Eternal life is about knowing God. "Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3, NIV). If you can have only one close friend, let it be God. Don't imagine you can make Him happy if you attend worship services more or less regularly and make the offering plate a little heavier. You must seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33). Draw near to Him. Allow Him to clean up the ugliness in your life. Don't be too busy to read the Bible. Don't reserve prayer for emergencies. Tell others what Jesus means to you. Think about Him continually from the worship service benediction until next week's prelude. May your dreams, your use of time and money, your conversations, and your thoughts center on God. He isn't satisfied being just a Facebook Friend!

Do you see yourself mostly ignoring God until you're in trouble or need His help? How will you change that? Read 2 Corinthians 6.

156 The Folly Toll

"Why haven't you taken out the garbage?" his father asked. He rebelliously screamed, "Because I don't feel like it!" Those who drive in the passing lane on the Folly Turnpike eventually must pay the toll. My father's discipline spared me from the eventual price people pay who only do what they want to do. Being enthusiastic about doing my chores was optional. Not doing them wasn't! I feared my father too much to disobey. Similarly, "fear of the LORD is the foundation of true wisdom" (Psalm 111:10, NIV). The wise person lives a God-centered life. The Lord knows driving on the narrow road that leads to life (Matthew 7:14) is best. Both for you and for others whom your life touches.

In the coronavirus world of 2020, doing what you wanted to do wasn't wise. Neither was living like the threat was imaginary. That

could kill you or your grandfather whom you might infect. Have you noticed the often-hidden folly toll behind life's catastrophes? A young person dies in a traffic accident. It's a terrible tragedy. When the facts emerge, folly frequently is the culprit—speeding, texting while driving, or driving under the influence. Folly maximizes the mistakes you make. Wisdom minimizes them. When you do what you want to do as a way of life, undesirable consequences are inevitable.

Proverbs 9:13–18 reveal the ultimate toll of living disconnected from God. The wise live vitally connected to Him. They're skilled in living for Him. Their good fruit results from persistently doing right when they feel like doing nothing. They feel good when they do good. On the other hand, those who consistently do what they want to do are only skilled in living for themselves. They feel good when they do bad (verse 17). They don't know that they're already deep in the realm of the dead (verse 18).

How would more skill in godly living help you escape the folly toll? How does that motivate you to continue to grow in your relationship with God?

Read 2 Corinthians 7.

157 How Spiritually Mature Are You?

I've coached high school athletes for more than twenty years. Most of them were a quart or two down on the maturity dipstick. A few showed Corvette-like intellectual development. But their emotional maturity was horse and buggy. They learned too much too quickly before they were ready to deal with it emotionally. Some of their parents unintentionally hindered them. They tried to prepare the road of life for them instead of preparing them for the road of life.

What are the marks of maturity? Mature people keep their promises. Neither flattery nor criticism untracks them. They're humble. Their character, not their emotions, is in the driver's seat. They understand how much they've received. They're consistently grateful. They put others before themselves. They seek advice and wisdom from others before acting.

The spiritually mature share similar characteristics. As with students, maturity isn't about how much they know. It's marked by what they do with what they know. Their lives produce Jesus-like fruit (Ephesians 4:13). "The seed that fell among thorns stands for

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those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature" (Luke 8:14, NIV). The Apostle Paul's passion was to "present everyone fully mature in Christ" (Colossians 1:28, NIV).

So, a Bible content quiz can never measure your spiritual maturity. What matters isn't how much of the Bible you've been through. It's how much of the Bible has been through you. Christian education is about transformation, not information. How you behave because of what you know about God is what counts. I've developed a tool to help you see yourself in the spiritual mirror. I've also provided specific suggestions to address areas of weakness. I'm not a "Perfect 3" on this tool. I don't expect you to be either! I invite you to respond to each of the eighteen statements if you haven't previously done so. You can find them at:

<https://www.christiangrowthresources.com/spiritual-health-assessment>. I further challenge you to explore "Spiritual Health Helps" to address your weakest areas. You can find them at:

<https://www.christiangrowthresources.com/spiritual-health-helps>.

What is your weakest area? What is one practical step you can take to strengthen it? Read 2 Corinthians 8.

Chapter 17

HIS SUPERIORITY OVER YOUR SUBSTITUTES

Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.

1 JOHN 5:21 NIV

158 Flee from Idolatry (1)

God insists on loyalty. Always has. Always will. He isn't satisfied to be among the fabulous five favorite things in your life. He won't share His throne with any rivals. He forbids having any other gods before Him or making an idol in the form of any created thing (Exodus 20:3-4).

His demands shouldn't seem strange. I know a man who delivered P-cola. He couldn't drink C-cola. Seeing a P-driver down an ice-cold C isn't a good advertisement for P. What kind of advertisement is it when you pay more attention to things and other people than to Him?

Your "images," purchases, thought life, and use of time reveal God's rivals. They highlight your priorities. The images could be pictures hanging on your walls or pasted into an album. They might be coin collections, cars, or awards. They might be trophies, mounted animals, or fish. They could be your place on the ladder of success. The material things around you define what you value.

God isn't against fun and feeling good. He created you with the capacity to enjoy Him and the things He's made. He richly provides you with everything for your enjoyment (1 Timothy 6:17). If you walk the path God sets before you, He'll fill you with joy and eternal pleasures (Psalm 16:11). The issue isn't whether you'll experience pleasure or not. It's whether you'll walk the path God sets before you or your own. Will you trust His judgment? Will you pretend you know better than He what will make you happy?

Idolatry strolls into your life. It enters through the wide-open door of living for pleasure independently of God. You naturally put "things" on the throne intended for Him alone. You worship and serve them instead of Him. You ignore the Giver of every good and

perfect gift (James 1:17). You love His gifts instead of Him with all your heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:37). You naturally love pleasure more than you love God (2 Timothy 3:4).

Americans spend money like they love pleasure far more than they love God. They spent 646 billion on just outdoor recreation in 2010. That's more than five times as much as they gave to their churches in 2009.¹ Preoccupation with pleasure decreases the time available to nurture your spiritual life or to minister to others.

You can overcome pleasure's attraction through the self-control the Holy Spirit provides (Galatians 5:23). You have God's promise that whenever you face temptation, He faithfully provides a way out (1 Corinthians 10:13). Expect Him to give you that way of escape. Look for it.²

Identify God's rivals in your life based on your "images," purchases, what you think about when you're free to think about anything, and your use of time. Read 2 Corinthians 9.

159 Flee from Idolatry (2)

Heroes embody your ideals. They're already what you'd like to be. Hero selection changes through time. It reveals what matters most to you. Your heroes are your dreams with skin on them. They come in two categories—faith heroes and other kinds. Becoming like faith heroes moves you toward God. Hebrews 11 lists heroes who by their faith overcame life's obstacles. Imitating other kinds of heroes moves you away from God.

You become progressively more like whatever you worship. Few look up to moral heroes like the apostle Paul. He challenged the Philippians to put into practice what they'd learned or received or heard from or seen in him (Philippians 4:9). Instead, you naturally select those who have admirable but not necessarily godly qualities. The best defense against idolatry is to be an imitator of God (Ephesians 5:1). Follow someone who is following the example of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Hero worship sprays gasoline on the fires of your self-centered dreams. It suggests they're attainable and worthy of pursuit. You worship what you wish you were. Your hope is that others will adore you when your dreams become reality. Like Satan, you want a portion

of the glory that's God's alone. God said He won't give His glory to another or His praise to idols (Isaiah 42:8).

I spent years channeling my time and energy toward academic and athletic goals. I was a slave in a "goal mine." Goals were my gods. They demanded the best of my time, talents, thoughts, and finances. You take yourself out of God's game when you give your life to earthly goals. God designed you to live for what will outlast you. Paul described this way of life as setting your heart and mind on things above, not on earthly things (Colossians 3:1-2).

Idolatry enters your life through your insecurities. You compensate for your lack of trust in God by constructing your own "protective" walls. Mostly, you trust money to protect you. Paul labels greed to accumulate more as idolatry (Colossians 3:5). Jesus said that you can't serve both God and money (Matthew 6:24). Your heart is where your treasure is.¹

How is hero worship, goal achievement, or financial security interfering with your becoming the person God wants you to be? Read 2 Corinthians 10.

160 Flee from Idolatry (3)

If you lived in the United States in September 2020, you had almost a 30 percent chance of COVID-related depression. If you were struggling economically, there was almost a 50 percent chance.¹ Where are you looking for hope? Is your deliverer a face mask, adequate ventilation, social distancing, a check from the federal government, a vaccine, your bank account, or a political leader? You must address threats intelligently. But you also need God's wisdom to explore the underlying reasons for your depression. I'm suggesting the real problem is that you might be trusting untrustworthy substitutes for God to deliver you.

Your idolatry is more obvious to others than it is to you. It torpedoed and sank Israel's national ship more than 2,500 years ago. Idolatry isn't irrelevant today. An idol is a replacement for God. You recruit it because you think He's not enough to meet your needs and give you what you want. You think it will protect, fulfill, and energize you. You hope it will provide joy, satisfaction, and contentment. Behind the scenes, self-satisfaction and doing life your way are your idols. God promises that if you put Him and His purposes first, He'll

meet your needs (Matthew 6:33). You'll experience a full and meaningful life (John 10:10) that no God-substitute can provide. Are you living like you believe that?

Trusting God's promises appears risky. It seems safer to depend on political leaders for deliverance and material things for security. It's not. The most common substitute for God is money. It's a powerful tool to get what you want. You can't serve both it and God (Matthew 6:24). Money talks. But it's usually idol-chatter. If your defining passion on earth is something other than loving and serving God, you're guilty of idolatry. You're commanded to flee from it (1 Corinthians 10:14). Join with David and declare: "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" (Psalm 18:2, NIV).

What idols are whispering in your ear and distracting you from fully listening to and trusting God? Read 2 Corinthians 11.

161 Pie Plate Spirituality

About 27 percent of people in the United States are spiritual but not religious. About 48 percent are both.¹ I'm wondering if you compartmentalize spirituality. How much does it affect your daily life? Like a pillow on the sofa, it might have its place. Is it a minor part of the décor? For the spiritual and religious that might mean attending religious meetings one to eight hours a month. For the spiritual but not religious it might include sporadically thinking about a higher power. It happens when encountering the Grand Canyon. It strikes when experiencing other awe-inspiring aspects of the natural world.

Is God just one piece of the pie of your existence? Other pieces include family, work, recreation, health, home, finances, relationships, and education. I confess I've thought that way about life. By God's grace, I don't anymore. Why? Because such thinking is a symptom of a life that's all about me. The most moral and virtuous self-centered life (if there is such a thing) is raw idolatry in a tuxedo or evening gown.

I'm suggesting it's healthier to think of God, not as a piece of the pie, but as the pie plate of life. "*Whatever you do* (emphasis, mine), 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" (Colossians 3:23–24, NIV). God doesn't want to be a piece of your life. He wants to be the center of it.

What is the next step to make your family, work, recreation, health, home, finances, relationships, and education all more God-centered and God-honoring?

Read 2 Corinthians 12.

162 White Flag of Victory

A boy's hobby was collecting coins. He often showed them off to other kids in the community. He had one coin that was far more valuable than the others. He didn't let the other kids see it. He feared someone might take it. One day as he was walking in the neighborhood, he saw a girl with a bag of chocolate bars. He wanted the candy badly. He offered her his coin collection for it. She accepted. He didn't give her his special coin. She didn't need to know about that.

You're like him, aren't you? You want the chocolate—God's presence, forgiveness of your sins, abundant life, answered prayers, Jesus with you always, and the glories of heaven. Like the boy, you struggle to give up everything for it. Your sinful nature agrees with the Enemy's lie that you can't trust God. (Genesis 3:1).

God knows what you're holding back and why (Hebrews 4:13). He knows you're afraid you can't live without your special coin. You're unwilling to wave the white flag of complete surrender. It's really a trust problem. Do you not think you can trust the One who sacrificed His Son (John 3:16) for you? He offered to provide whatever you need through Him (Romans 8:32).

What is that prized coin in your pocket? Is it the driver's seat of your life? You won't have peace as long as you cling to it. You can't serve two masters. That special coin has a grip on you tighter than your grip on it. When you wave the white flag of surrender furiously, your hand won't be able to cling to lesser things. Waving the white flag releases you from the special coin's prison. If you're like me, that

sounds very freeing right now. But you'll have to learn it all over again tomorrow!

How is the special coin in your life hindering you from fulfilling God's purpose for you? Read 2 Corinthians 13.

163 Are We There Yet?

Kids ask, "Are we there yet?" when they're anxious to get to the beach. I can be like that too. I want to get somewhere and be someone that I'm not yet. God usually has a different itinerary and journey's end in mind. He's more interested in developing my trust in Him than in my arriving somewhere by a course I've charted.

Before I drive to a place I've never been before, I get directions from Google Maps. I want the big picture of the route numbers and streets I must travel. I write down the directions and take them with me.

God doesn't give me the big-picture directions I covet. He directs step-by-step one turn at a time. It's on a need-to-know basis. Sometimes it's hard to get even that much out of Him. I wonder what to do next. God's leadership style encourages me to stay close. I must continue listening to and trusting in Him.

God sent Samuel to Jesse in Bethlehem. He was to anoint one of Jesse's sons as king. God could've told him to anoint David, initially. But He didn't (1 Samuel 16:1). Samuel saw seven of Jesse's sons pass before him. He concluded he wasn't to anoint any of them (1 Samuel 16:10). Finally, when David arrived, the Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; this is the one" (1 Samuel 16:12, NIV). He had to sense God's direction eight times instead of once. God's leading doesn't always add up while it's happening. It usually makes more sense years later. You can ask, "Are we there yet?" but it's best to keep quiet and trust the Driver.

If God leads one step at a time, what does that say about how close to Him you need to be daily? Read Galatians 1.

164 What Are You Doing Today?

Since I retired, my wife at times asks what my agenda is for the day. I might tell her I'm working in the garden. Sometimes I tell her

I'm writing a blog. In warmer weather, it might be mowing the grass. Occasionally, it's picking up sticks in the yard. It might be preparing a Bible study. It could even be fishing in the Susquehanna River. You plan your day, but then life happens. My wife never laughs when I tell her my plans. I suspect God does! Unanticipated events, phone calls, text messages, and encounters with people can put your plans on the back burner. That's how God's agenda bumps "what you're doing today" out of the way. If you're like me, you can easily miss those divine interruptions. You can think you don't have time for them. Those intrusions transport you from "chasing after the wind" (Ecclesiastes 1:14) to accomplishing God's purposes for today.

God brought Saul to Samuel to anoint him ruler over Israel (1 Samuel 9:16). Saul thought he was looking for his father's lost donkeys (1 Samuel 9:3). Meanwhile, God was paving a life-interrupting change of direction—becoming Israel's first king.

Sometimes God's interruptions are minor like traffic lights. They temporarily stop you to help someone in need. Sometimes, they're like an unexpected detour that takes you away from your agenda to do something else. Sometimes, God's interruptions change your destination entirely. Farmers become kings or seminary professors. Biologists or professional athletes become pastors. Every day believers become missionaries in their places of employment without changing their addresses. What are you doing today? Maybe not!

When has God interrupted your plans? What happened?

Read Galatians 2.

165 Divine Appointments

Today's agenda includes mulching blueberry plants and picking up sticks in the backyard. Then I must prepare to paint part of the house. After that, I'll water my vegetable plants. I must also write a blog. I will review my notes to teach my Wednesday night Bible class. I will then trim weeds around the house. I will coach at a home track and field meet. The truth is I couldn't complete all those items.

Interrupted agendas punctuate my life. Last week our toilet wasn't working properly. My wife asked me to fix it. My daughter asked me to kill a spider in her room. My grandkids asked me to do

various activities with them. I interrupted completing my original agenda by adding and completing additional jobs. That's life!

God overrules my agenda. I planned to be a biologist for the Pennsylvania Fish Commission until I retired. Overruled! I planned to be the Associate for Discipleship for the Eastern Regional Conference until I retired. Overruled! I had dreams of being an Olympic athlete. Overruled! The list goes on.

When I was in my twenties, people who interrupted or overruled my agenda irritated me. I still experience remnants of that irritation. In my wiser moments, I realize behind the interruptions are opportunities. When I meet others' needs, I'm loving my neighbor as myself (Matthew 22:35-39). You're on earth to love God and others. You're here to help them complete God's agendas for them. Real life is in the interruptions. It's not in completing your agenda! Interruptions are often divine appointments. That puts interrupting and overruling your agenda in perspective.

When is the last time God interrupted your agenda with a divine appointment to collaborate with Him to meet someone's pressing need?

Read Galatians 3.

166 Name of Fame

Where is the major place you want your name to appear? My name has never been in the lights. I'm more likely in "Who's That?" than "Who's Who." Not finding me in Wikipedia isn't a terrible thing. I don't assume life would be better if I were a celebrated superstar. At one time, Taylor Swift had at least 85.6 million Twitter followers. Cristiano Ronaldo had more than 189 million Instagram followers. Twitter, Instagram or Facebook followers aren't the measures of my worth. I've spent too much time trying to prove my worth. Have you done the same?

I've discovered life is most fulfilling when I'm meeting others' needs. Giving energizes me more than receiving (Acts 20:35). It shifts my life into joy gear. Engraving my name on people's hearts is better than seeing it on a marquee, on Wikipedia, or on an edition of "Who's Who." Have you experienced the same benefits of upside-down, others-focused living aligned with Jesus' agenda? His disciples

demonstrate they belong to Him by their love for other believers (John 13:34–35).

The deeds of the kings of Israel and Judah were written in the book of the annals of the kings (for example, 1 Kings 14:19). Their deeds mattered. Yours do too. God records all you say and do. You'll have to explain every careless word you've spoken (Matthew 12:36). "And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books" (Revelation 20:12, NIV). Your name appearing in the Book of Life is eternally, supremely valuable. That's the name of fame that really counts.

How does the pursuit of fame distract from what is most important? What adjustments do you need to make? Read Galatians 4.

167 What Is in the Center?

What's in your hamburger bun? Burger King rolled out the Impossible Burger on April 1, 2019. Restaurants and supermarkets nationwide sell plant-based meat. I'm curious. But I haven't "bitten" yet. This new product has its critics. They question how healthy it is. That's because of how highly processed it is and the effect of the GMOs it contains. Others defend it. They say it's at least as healthy as eating beef. It causes less harm to the environment. What's in the center of your hamburger bun could impact the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere significantly over time.

Similarly, what's in the center of your life critically affects your and others' quality of life now and forever. There are only two applicants for the job—your agenda and God's agenda. Your agenda in the center is the norm. Its P-drivers are pleasure, possessions, and pride (1 John 2:16). It's not best for you or others for the long haul. Keeping God's agenda in the center is a daily choice (Romans 12:1). You can summarize it as Christ-centered living.

A level measures whether a structure is horizontal or vertical. You adjust your work until the bubble floats in the middle of a tube of colored liquid when you place the level on the structure. Jesus Christ is the bubble in a Christian's life. You adjust every aspect of your life to keep Him in the center. You raise your standards. You

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lower your resistance to submissive obedience. Whatever it takes! He must be supreme in every area of your life (Colossians 1:18). What's in the center makes an incredible difference in both the short and long haul.

Remind yourself at least three times today that keeping Christ at the center of your life benefits you and others over the short and long haul.

Read Galatians 5.

Chapter 18

HIS WAYS FOR YOUR WAYS

Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.

HEBREWS 3:10 NIV

168 Checking the Foundation

Drink-spilling during meals was a Selcher brothers' tradition in the 1950s. Our kitchen floor wasn't level. The flow predictably whooshed toward my father who sat at the south end of the table. Fortunately, he'd quickly use the vinyl table covering as a dam. He blocked the spilling wave as it cascaded southeast toward the floor.

Our kitchen floor wasn't level because the foundation under it wasn't. Spilled drinks in our kitchen still flow southeast today. If the foundation is wrong, the rest of the house can't be right. The foundation on which you build matters. Is it trustworthy? Is it square?

In America, you can choose many foundations that aren't square. The cement blocks that compose them include money, education, religion, eating for pleasure, politics, sports, alcohol, partying, relationships with others, and entertainment. They can't support a meaningful or satisfying life. Then he [Jesus] said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life doesn't consist in an abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15, NIV). The possessions money buys can't fill the empty place in your heart.

The one square, trustworthy foundation to build on is obeying God. "Be careful to follow every command I'm giving you today, so that you may [really] live and increase and may enter and possess the land the LORD promised on oath to your ancestors" (Deuteronomy 8:1, NIV, emphasis in brackets mine). If life doesn't feel square, check your foundation. Knowing what the Bible says isn't a trustworthy, square foundation. Obeying it is.

Why is knowing what God says no substitute for obeying what God says today? Read Galatians 6.

169 Sort of Following Jesus

A television show described the behavior of polar bears. It showed a hormone-driven male in a hurry to pass on his genetic material. With the best sense of smell of all animals, he detected a female's tracks in the snow. He followed them. He put each of his paws where her paws had been. He eventually found her. I'm guessing the videographer was the best man at the wedding! Before long, the male and female went their separate ways. He was no more committed to her than a Clydesdale horse is to a horsefly.

Watching him walk in those tracks got me thinking about following Jesus. You begin your spiritual journey, like the polar bear, passionately walking in Jesus' tracks. As time passes, you tend to lose enthusiasm and focus. You easily forget all He's done for you and what you owe Him. Trivial things replace Him. They deceptively seem to radiate with a supernatural glow. You channel your wholehearted devotion elsewhere. Your defining passion becomes something other than Jesus.

God isn't content with half-hearted commitment. Wholehearted devotion is the fragrance of love. That's what He wants! "Sort of" following reveals a lack of trust in and respect for God (Numbers 14). Why do you wander away? Male polar bears are independent creatures. They do what they want when they want, and where they want. That describes the "hormonal drive" of your self-seeking nature. Every day is the best day to decide to follow Jesus. In wedding vows, no bride wants to hear "sort of" instead of "I do." God doesn't either!

*In what ways are you "sort of" following Jesus? How will you change that?
Read Ephesians 1.*

170 Are You Following Jesus?

My father died in 2015. When I was growing up, he was the boss. My disobedience brought predictable unpleasantness. I ate what my mother and later my aunt served, as he did. I learned from him how to tend the family garden and sell homegrown celery and strawberries. I learned to drive a car his way. I admired, respected,

and feared him. He taught me how to think and behave. I wanted to be like him. His values are mine. I'm his disciple.

Similarly, following Jesus means He's the boss and you imitate Him. You do what He says and does. His values are yours. Disobedience brings the predictable unpleasantness of His discipline (Proverbs 3:12, Hebrews 12:6).

Following Jesus means, as He did, you deny your own desires so you can love God and others (Luke 9:23). You serve God instead of material things (Matthew 6:24, 19:21). You serve others sacrificially (Mark 10:45). You fish for people (Matthew 4:19). You care for His followers (John 21:17). You don't live in the darkness but in the light of life (John 8:12). You live shrewdly and innocently (Matthew 10:16). You're clothed with power from on high to live on earth (Luke 24:49). As the Father sent Jesus, He sends you (John 20:21). As Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:1), so must you be (Ephesians 5:18). His joy was Holy Spirit generated (Luke 10:21), and so is yours (Galatians 5:22). Jesus-like love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control characterize your life as the Holy Spirit empowers you (Galatians 5:22–23). "It is enough for students to be like their teachers, and servants like their masters...." (Matthew 10:25, NIV). Following Jesus inevitably results in becoming more like Him.

*In what ways is your life more Jesus-like than it was a year ago?
Read Ephesians 2.*

171 Thumbs up from God

About 55–60 years ago while we worked on my uncle's farm, my dad would at times flash hand signals. He used them to give directions to my brothers and me from a distance. We had a better chance of winning the lottery (even though it didn't yet exist) than correctly interpreting those signals. Our collective denseness didn't make him happy. A thumbs-up was never one of his signals!

God's "hand" summarizes how He relates to us. Generally, His hand is either heavy on or gracious toward us (thumbs-down or thumbs-up). It's not random. It's conditional on our receptiveness to Him. The Philistines experienced God's heavy hand. That was because they took the Ark of the Covenant from Israel (1 Samuel 5:7,

5:11, and 6:5). The LORD stretches out His hand in judgment against those who reject His ways (Isaiah 31:3). God's eternal thumbs-down goes to those who unrepentantly rebel against Him. Hebrews 10:31 (NIV) spells out the fearful consequences of that settled choice: "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." Those who steadfastly refuse to receive God's provision for their sin (Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection in their place), will experience God's heavy hand of judgment forever.

On the other hand, God blesses what the obedient put their hand to (Deuteronomy 12:7, 18; 14:29; 15:10, 18; 16:15; 23:20; 24:19; 28:8 and 30:9). His gracious hand was on the obedient Ezra (Ezra 7:6, 9, 28) and Nehemiah (Nehemiah 2:8, 18). It's on everyone who looks to Him (Ezra 8:22). Faith and obedience or unbelief and disobedience—it's our choice. Accordingly, God's response is either thumbs-up or thumbs-down. It's much easier to understand than my dad's hand signals.

Imagine the joy of getting a thumbs-up from God at the end of today! What do you need to do to receive it? Read Ephesians 3.

172 Time Travel

History marches to the drumbeat of God's timing. Life is most fulfilling when you do too. God is in control of what happens and when. The timing of events is purposeful. Jesus died for the ungodly at just the right time (Romans 5:6). Jesus said, "My time is not yet here" (John 7:6, NIV). The Father would take Him up into heaven at an appointed time (Luke 9:51). How can you march in step with God's timing as you relate to your past, present, and future? How can you maximize your positive influence during your brief hike down life's path?

You learn from your past but can't allow its failures and regrets to paralyze you. A personal failure taught me that people need to be a higher priority than my projects. I changed my priorities. I moved on. I want to learn from the past, but not camp there.

Remembering God's past faithfulness fortifies you to live fearlessly in the present. God told Israel to remember the time of their departure from Egypt all the days of their lives (Deuteronomy 16:3). They were to remember His love, power, and faithfulness.

When the gales of worry assail, you can escape their gusts in Him who is your refuge and strength in times of trouble (Psalm 46:1). “He will be a sure foundation for your times, a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge; The fear of the LORD is the key to this treasure” (Isaiah 33:6, NIV). If you fear Him, you don’t need to fear anything else.

Your priorities in a God-centered present are to love Him with all your being, to love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37–38), and to love other believers as Jesus has loved you (John 13:34–35). As you seek first His kingdom and righteousness, He provides everything you need (Matthew 6:33). He blesses you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all you need, you will abound in every good work (2 Corinthians 9:8). Doing good works is part of your job description. You can’t do that well if you adopt and get cozy with the values of your culture. “Live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear” (1 Peter 1:17, NIV).

Watching the ball during a drive helps golfers hit it far and straight. Focusing on loving and serving God today prepares you to love and serve Him even more tomorrow. It keeps you on the straight and narrow path. A key time travel question is, “What decision should I make or what action should I take now that would be best for the distant future?” To harvest zucchini a month from now, I must protect the plant from stem borers today. Even though I’m tired. What’s best for tomorrow is usually not what’s the easiest today.

How could consistently asking and answering, “What is best for the long haul?” help you make wise decisions? Read Ephesians 4.

173 LED Living

The world is incredibly interconnected. Today’s choices and actions affect others near and far. For example, littering is convenient. But it creates a mess for someone else to clean up. Clearing the Amazon rainforest for farmland and pastures makes billions of people breathe less easily and sweat more profusely. Flushing medications down the toilet pollutes someone else’s drinking water. Excessively fertilizing crops in Ohio creates algae blooms on Lake Erie. On the other hand, supporting a child in Haiti

significantly improves that child's health and future. Sending a Christmas Child shoebox brings a smile and an unforgettable day to a child. Volunteering at a food bank helps feed the hungry. LED living maximizes your positive impact on others. So, what is it?

An LED bulb lasts fifty times longer and is 90 percent more efficient than an incandescent bulb. The latter releases 90 percent of the energy it consumes as heat.¹ While consuming little electricity, LEDs produce light for a very long time. LED living is minimizing consumption while maximizing giving. That's how Jesus lived! He could have dwelt in a king's palace. But He had "no place to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20, NIV). He didn't come to earth for others to serve Him. He came to serve and to sacrifice His life for you (Mark 10:45). The Apostle Paul described himself as "poor but making many rich" (2 Corinthians 6:10, NIV). LED living is living simply. It's humbly considering and acting on what's best for others, not just what's best for you (Philippians 2:3–4). Living on less allows you to give more over the long haul.

How could LED living bring more joy to you and others?

Read Ephesians 5.

174 Payback Snapback

Payback is an angry, automatic revenge reaction toward those who've hurt you. It's doing to them what they've done to you. But revenge snaps back at you. Arthur was mad. I stole the basketball from him two or three times. It happened during a middle school pickup basketball game during a school lunch break. From about eight feet away he whipped the ball at me as hard as he could. I didn't expect it. I didn't react at all. The ball hit my knee. It bounced back to hit Arthur squarely in the face. That's how payback snapback often works!

Not only that, but revenge is also hazardous to your health! Emotional and physical reactions after committing an act of vengeance often include negative moods and depression, increasing psychosomatic illnesses, greater stress, and decreasing heart health.¹

Counter-revenge attacks often follow. The person exacting revenge thinks the act was fair considering the offense. The one who was attacked thinks it was way over the top. Without forgiveness, the

cycle of revenge and counter-revenge continues unabated. Present-day examples included the relationships between the Israelis and Palestinians and between the Shi'ites and Sunnis.

Samson and the Philistines played the revenge and counter-revenge game. Both defended their vengeance as doing to the other what the other had done to them (Judges 15:10–11). Samson died for it as did thousands of Philistines. Revenge isn't God's way. "Don't take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Romans 12:19, NIV). When I was a kid, I remember shooting a BB gun at a can about forty feet away. One BB bounced back and struck my forehead. Payback snaps back!

When has payback snapped back in your life? What have you learned from that? Read Ephesians 6.

175 How to be Remembered

When you're dead and gone, do you know what people will remember about you? My brother, Sam, has been an excellent dentist for more than 40 years. Recently, a friend told me a story about him. More than twenty years ago, my friend's wife had a dental appointment with my brother. She had to drive about ten miles to get to his office. Somehow, when she got there, she discovered her cat had made the journey with her. It was under the hood of the car. My brother interrupted his dentistry to rescue the cat. When she was in emotional distress, my brother was there to help. My friend didn't tell me a story about my brother's dental expertise. He remembered an act of unexpected kindness. It happened during an emotionally challenging time for his wife. When you help others during their emotional thunderstorms, they won't forget you.

My brother has done a wonderful job taking care of my teeth for more than forty years. What I remember most, however, are the times I've had plumbing or another kind of emergency, and he was there to help.

I saw the same truth in my pastoral ministry. I've spent more than 15,000 hours preparing and delivering sermons. Congregations don't remember the details of any of them. But they never forget the

30 minutes I spent with them in the intensive care unit. They recall my presence in their hospital room.

People don't forget your acts of unexpected kindness during an emotional crisis. Even more importantly, God remembers them. "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' ... 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'" (Matthew 25:34–36, 40, NIV). If you want people and God to remember you, you know what to do!

What will you do today that others will remember? Read Philippians 1.

176 How to Make a Difference Tomorrow

In the summer of 2018, I harvested enough green beans to supply our family with fifty-two meals. Rewind twenty-three years. What's now a garden was then a "lawn." Appropriately, Weed Eater made my mower. The yard was about one-third crabgrass, one-third dandelion, and one-third other weeds! About 1997, I dug up part of the yard. I began improving the soil's fertility with organic matter. I removed more than one thousand pounds of quartz rocks. Over twenty years I created an eight-hundred-square-foot garden. Today's work can make a difference tomorrow.

God makes grass, weeds, and beans grow. That's way above your pay grade. In 1996 God was growing grass and weeds. I had no green beans in the freezer. Why? I didn't do my part. I didn't plant beans! Even if I had, it wasn't the kind of environment where beans could thrive. You harvest what you plant (Galatians 6:7), but not immediately. The harvest is greatest if you provide a nurturing environment. God can produce a harvest tomorrow from today's loving words and deeds. But only if you sow them! It's work!

"Let go and let God!" "God helps those who help themselves!" If you're seeking to live wisely, these two statements confusingly

point you in opposite directions. Both are often on the lips of people. The Bible's pages contain neither. So, plant seeds and trust God to make them grow. Make a difference tomorrow by working today. Labor as if everything depends on you. Pray as if everything depends on God.

*To reap a harvest tomorrow, what do you need to do today?
Read Philippians 2.*

177 Heaven on Earth

I have a friend born in 1920 named Homer. His mental sharpness is far above the typical male his age. I've heard him explain why he believes in Jesus' teachings. He says that if everyone lived according to them, we'd experience heaven on earth. Well, human existence is anything but heaven on earth. So, what's clogging the pipes? Why aren't love, joy, peace, and truth universal?

The clogging agent is a greasy, sticky accumulation of billions of "I am" particles. They're seeking to dethrone the One who identified himself as I Am (Exodus 3:14). In other words, most of the problems in every generation stem from dependent human beings living their own way. They function as if they weren't accountable to their creator. It happens in the church too.

You can usually get away with short-term self-interest without apparent consequences. You can thumb your nose at the God of the Universe. He seems not to notice. No immediate lightning strike from heaven zaps you. God could've created a world where He metes out immediate justice for disobedience. He didn't. He wants you to obey Him because you love Him (John 14:15). Not because you fear immediate punishment. This freedom to love Him, however, has pipe-clogging possibilities. "When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, people's hearts are filled with schemes to do wrong (Ecclesiastes 8:11, NIV).

That's what happened in the southern kingdom of Judah more than 2,500 years ago. "From the time I brought your ancestors up from Egypt until today, I warned them again and again, saying, 'Obey me.' But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubbornness of their evil hearts. So I brought on them all the curses of the covenant I had commanded them to follow but that

they did not keep” (Jeremiah 11:7–8, NIV). Long-term, following the whims and stubbornness of your evil heart, brings painful consequences. They’re all out of proportion to the joys of your imagined independence. Heaven on earth requires you to do something. A down payment of what will someday be universal love, joy, peace, and truth depends on living God’s way, not your own.

What do you find most difficult about listening and paying attention to God? Read Philippians 3.

178 What’s Your Secret?

I was working in my yard near the road. A car stopped on the far side of it about twenty-five feet away. A man I didn’t know put his window down. He complimented me on the appearance of my garden, which is close to the road. He asked, “What is your secret?” I shrugged my shoulders. I didn’t know what to tell him. After he’d left, I thought about it. I concluded that if I had to pick just one thing it would be Miracle-Gro. That’s far from the whole story. A plumber, carpenter, or doctor couldn’t identify one secret for success. Training and experience have stocked their toolboxes with dozens of tricks of the trade.

About a month after the garden inquiry I went to a church as a guest preacher. The worship leader asked how old I was. He then guessed. He underestimated my age by about ten years. When I told him my age, he asked, “What is your secret?” I responded that one must choose parents wisely. I was jokingly referring to the influence of heredity. I told him that my father lived to 102 and his mother to 103. Of course, aging is more complicated than just heredity. Diet, exercise, proper rest, and other elements also play a part. People long for single secret simplicity. But life is more complex than that.

Following Jesus has no easy button. If I had to summarize it, I’d borrow the words of the old hymn. You must trust and obey Jesus. The question is, “How do you do that?”

In sports, strong, fast, quick, and coordinated natural athletes excel effortlessly. Natural artists can draw what they see. People like me draw stick figures of people.

You’re a natural sinner (Romans 7:14–20), not a natural Christian. Following Jesus is hard for all of us. It requires self-denial

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(Luke 9:23). It includes learning a new way of life (Ephesians 2:1–4). It involves obedience (John 14:15), discipline (1 Corinthians 9:24), perseverance (James 1:12), and much more. I don't have answers for all possible following Jesus questions. What I've learned about following Him over 50 years I've summarized in ABC Discipleship (<https://www.christiangrowthresources.com/abc-discipleship>). I invite you to check it out.

What makes following Jesus hard for you? Read Philippians 4.

Chapter 19

HIS MAJESTY FOR YOUR WORSHIP

Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

JOHN 20:28 NIV

179 Jesus Is Lord (1)

Few people today question that Jesus was a man. Many doubt He was God. In the early church, it was exactly the opposite. Spiritual leaders who spawned false teaching didn't think Jesus was both fully God and fully man. Cerinthus taught incorrectly that Christ came on Jesus at His baptism. He left Him at the crucifixion. Jesus was a mere man. Wrong! Jesus is God with skin on!

Jesus Christ is more than just a great man and a great teacher. In Greek mythology, beings that were half man and half god were demigods. One parent was a god. The other was a human being. Jesus wasn't a demigod. His conception was a miracle. Mary was a human being. The Holy Spirit was responsible for her pregnancy. Jesus wasn't 50 percent man and 50 percent God. He was 100 percent man and 100 percent God. He's fully God and fully man. He's God with skin.

James Gandolfini starred in the TV show, *The Sopranos*. In a 2009 appearance on "Inside the Actor's Studio," James Lipton asked him a question. "If heaven exists, what would you like to hear God say at the pearly gates?" Gandolfini's response—"Take over for a while, I'll be right back."¹ It's a novel wish. But it isn't going to happen!

At Jesus' birth, an angel called Him Savior, Christ, and the Lord (Luke 2:11). He's the Word. The Word was God (John 1:1). The Word became flesh (John 1:14). Since He's the Word made flesh, He's both God and man. Thomas, one of Jesus' disciples, saw His crucifixion wounds. He described Jesus as "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28)

Jesus claimed the ability to do something only the Lord can do—forgive sin (Mark 2:7–11). He claimed the same title as the Lord

of Psalm 23:1—shepherd. In John 10:11 He claimed to be the good shepherd. He lays down His life for the sheep. The clear conclusion is that Jesus is Lord (Yahweh of the Old Testament).

Doubters insist Jesus never claimed to be God. They say His followers made that claim for Him. John's Gospel clearly describes Jesus' opponents' understanding of His claims. They tried to kill Him because they thought He was breaking the Sabbath. Furthermore, He was claiming a unique relationship with the Father, making Himself God's equal (John 5:18). In John 10:31 the Jews tried to stone Jesus. They did it because He claimed to be God (John 10:30–33). You can't believe in God without believing in His Son. God hasn't left that option open to you. (John 5:23).²

How does Jesus' being Lord affect your daily life? Read Colossians 1.

180 Jesus Is Lord (2)

Do you know anyone who has never done anything wrong? If you think so, you should talk to his/her spouse or best friends. You'd be hard-pressed to identify a single sinless day in your life. If you think differently, you need to reevaluate your definition of sin.

By contrast, John lived with Jesus as a disciple for more than three years. He didn't observe a single sin in His life in all that time (1 John 3:5). Peter agreed that Jesus was sinless (1 Peter 2:22). You wouldn't have to follow me for fifteen minutes to find evidence that I'm a sinner.

Jesus came and brought you God the Father. He didn't just tell you about God. He showed you what God is like. Knowing Him means knowing the Father (John 8:19). Believing in Him means believing in the Father (John 12:44). Honoring Him means honoring the Father (John 5:23). Hating Him means hating the Father (John 15:23). Seeing Him means seeing the Father (John 14:9). Welcoming Him means welcoming the Father (Mark 9:37).

Humans are concerned about who is number one. Who has the best car, dog, or house? Whatever the endeavor, we try to figure out who is the best. We want to be number one. We want to be the best at something. It's our way of proving our worth and making our mark on earth.

Jesus is fully man. He experienced human birth (Galatians 4:4) and normal human development (Luke 2:40). He grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men (Luke 2:52). He had a physical body (Hebrews 10:5). He had human names. Jesus is the Greek equivalent of the Old Testament “Joshua.” He’s the son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1). He had human weaknesses as we do. For example, He was weary (John 4:6), hungry (Matthew 4:2), and thirsty (John 19:28). He needed sleep (Matthew 8:24). He was tempted (Hebrews 2:18). He’s repeatedly called and called Himself a man (John 8:40). John the Baptist (John 1:30), Peter (Acts 2:22), and Paul (Acts 13:38) all called Him a man. Most people don’t question whether Jesus was a man.

People question whether Jesus is God. Jesus has the marks of a deity. He’s eternal. He was before John (John 1:15), Abraham (John 8:58), and the world (John 17:5). He existed at the beginning (John 1:1). He continues forever (Hebrews 1:11). He was in heaven while on earth (John 3:13) and vice versa (Matthew 28:20). He fills everything (Ephesians 1:2–3). He knows everything (John 16:30). He knew the Samaritan woman’s past (John 4:29). All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Him (Colossians 2:3). He says, “I’m the Almighty” (Revelation 1:8). He upholds everything by His powerful word (Hebrews 1:3). He has all authority (Matthew 28:18). He has power over demons (Mark 5:11–15), disease (Luke 4:38–41), death (Matthew 9:25), nature (John 2:11), and everything (Matthew 28:18). He’s the Creator (John 1:3) and upholder (Colossians 1:17). He forgives sin (Matthew 9:2, 6). He will raise the dead (John 20:25). He will execute all judgment (John 5:22). He’s the greatest and most mysterious man ever!

How does Jesus’ identity enable you to both relate to Him and worship Him today? Read Colossians 3.

182 Is the Trinity for Real?

Yes, the Trinity is for real. I don’t deny the Trinity because I don’t understand it. I don’t deny the existence of advanced calculus because I don’t comprehend it. The doctrine of the Trinity states that the one and only God exists as three separate co-equal and co-eternal fellowshiping persons. They’re the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

That doesn't make sense to me. But God's ways and thoughts are farther beyond mine than the farthest star is beyond earth (Isaiah 55:8–9). So is His nature. Although I can't fully grasp one God in three persons, I accept it. The Bible's revelation trumps what human reason considers a contradiction. If I try to explain the Trinity, I'll lose my mind. If I deny it, I put my soul in jeopardy.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit mysteriously inhabit one another. They work as a team to conduct God's plan for the ages. "Trinity" isn't a biblical term. Tertullian first coined it about 1800 years ago. He did so to express what the Bible clearly teaches about God's nature.

Jesus is the Son of God (John 9:35, Romans 1:4). He is the only begotten Son (John 3:16, 18). He is His firstborn Son (Heb 1:6). He was a Son before He was "given" (Isa 9:6). His "goings forth are from of old, from everlasting" (Micah 5:2, KJV). He's called the "Mighty God" (Isa 9:6). Like the Father, the Son is eternal (John 1:1, Isaiah 9:6). He's all-powerful (Hebrews 1:3, Revelation 1:8). He's all-knowing (Jn 16:30, 21:17). He's everywhere present (Matthew 28:20). He's unchangeable (Hebrews 13:8).

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are frequently interconnected in the Bible. There's far more evidence for the Trinity than I can include here. Christians are to be baptized in the name (singular) of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). Jesus promised, "But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me" (John 15:26, ESV). No one says the Trinity is easy to understand. But it's for real!

What does the doctrine of the Trinity tell you about Jesus' identity?

Read Colossians 4.

183 Don't Forget to Remember

When I was a child, May 30th was Decoration Day. We placed irises from my Uncle Bill's farm on the graves of loved ones. I remember taking flowers to my mother's grave. She died when I was seven. Decoration Day was about remembering.

Every year we remember and honor those who've made the ultimate sacrifice so we could live to the full. We do that on

Memorial Day weekend in between laps of the Indianapolis 500 and courses of the backyard barbecue! Seriously, we don't always gratefully remember our fallen heroes as we should.

“Remember,” appears 231 times in the New International Version of the Bible. God's people were to remember to live His way (Numbers 15:40). That was because He repeatedly intervened in their lives for their good (Deuteronomy 5:15). His past promises, miracles, wonders, and judgments are to be daily reference points. They're to motivate present obedient behavior (1 Chronicles 16:12). He remembers and blesses His people. He judges those who oppose them.

You sometimes forget the sacrifices of those who've made your freedom possible. But God always remembers His promises and keeps them (Psalm 105:8). He forgets only your sins (Isaiah 43:25). You're often distracted. You forget Him along with your fallen heroes. “Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent” (Revelation 3:3a, NIV). In other words, “Remember what you've heard, and live it out.” Worshipping God as a way of life begins with remembering.

How is spiritual forgetfulness harmful to your spiritual health? What habits will you start that will help you remember what God has done for you?

Read 1 Thessalonians 1.

184 Conformity

Your thinking, feeling, and behavior conform to a norm. The United States government expects its citizens to pay taxes. Motorists in the United States use turn signals and stop at stop signs and red lights. Okay, you've noticed not everyone conforms!

You begin life conforming to the world's deceptive definition of real life. Two would-be-life-shapers battle through the ages—God and the world. Both seek to control you. To be a friend of one is to be an enemy of the other (James 4:4).

What you love shapes you! How you think molds your destiny. The world shapes those who love it and embrace its values. God shapes those who love Him, embrace His values, and seek to be like Him. You have a choice. “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove

what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” (Romans 12:2, NIV). God’s will and the world’s will are mutually exclusive.

You’re born a lover of this world, naturally wired to follow the lusts of the flesh and of the eyes and the pride of life. The world encourages you like a demonic cheerleader. Satisfy your own desires. Make your name great. Go after the girls/guys, gold and glory. Meet your own needs. Aggressively pursue what you want. It’s the American way. But it’s not God’s way.

His way is to change how you think. That transforms your assumptions, values, and behavior. His word and Spirit set you free from the dark dungeon of foolish thinking created by believing lies (John 8:32). This reprogramming requires your cooperation and discipline. Life isn’t about you, but about Him. It’s about seeking His kingdom and righteousness. It’s about loving and obeying Him, loving your neighbor as yourself, and loving other believers as Jesus has loved you. It’s about using your resources to bring God glory. Loving Him makes you progressively more like Him (Romans 8:29).

Joshua wrote, “But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD”(Joshua 24:15, NIV). Choose wisely whom you will worship and serve.

In what specific ways are you conforming less to the world’s expectations than you used to? Read 1 Thessalonians 2.

185 Best Gift Reminder

At our house, broken things usually get the heave-ho—holey socks and underwear, tattered shoes, and non-stick pans that have lost their “non.” I’m glad God doesn’t similarly discard broken people.

Christmas celebrates a gift. It wasn’t under a tree, but eventually on one. God gave it to restore your broken relationship with Him. Giving it required His Son to humble Himself by becoming a human being. He initially slept in a smelly bed of scratchy hay while continuing to be fully God.

A broken pencil symbolizes the snapping of humanity's spiritual connection with God by doubt and disobedience (Genesis 3). As God promised, the result was spiritual and physical death. Brokenness accompanies both (Genesis 2:17). God temporarily provided animal sacrifices to address the brokenness. But it was like scotch taping a broken pencil together (Hebrews 10:1–4). It wasn't a permanent solution.

At just the right time, God gave His best gift. Jesus was born in Bethlehem as that permanent solution. Jesus can restore broken people like us. His death paid the penalty for our doubt and disobedience. "For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (Hebrews 10:14, NIV). An unbroken pencil represents restoration, but restoration isn't automatic. Full restoration requires receiving God's best gift. God makes broken people perfect by repentance and believing the good news. Jesus is the gift whose death, burial, and resurrection make you whole (Mark 1:15, Hebrews 10:10).

I suggest wrapping a broken and unbroken pencil together and placing them under the Christmas tree every year to remind you of God's best gift! He's worthy of your worship!

Have you received God's best gift (Jesus) into your heart?

Read 1 Thessalonians 3.

186 Worship (1)

The purpose of worship isn't to bless, entertain, heal or make you feel good. You don't attend a worship service to "get something." Worship is your whole personality giving glory to a holy God with your whole life. It doesn't end at noon on Sunday morning. All of life is an act of worship.

Your whole personality worships. According to William Temple, worship quickens the conscience by God's holiness, feeds the mind with his truth, cleanses the imagination by his beauty, opens the heart to his love, and devotes the will to his purpose.¹ Worshipping God changes you.

True worshippers respond to the revelation they receive. God reveals Himself through His word. If He didn't, you'd know little

about Him. His creation reveals His power, intelligence, order, and beauty (Romans 1:20). Beyond that, He'd be a complete mystery.

In Exodus 3, God speaks to Moses. He reveals that He is holy. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is concerned about the suffering of His people. He will rescue them.

To Isaiah in Isaiah 6, He reveals that He sits on a throne, high and exalted. The train of His robe fills the temple. He's holy. The whole earth is full of His glory. Isaiah's intellectual response was understanding God's revelation. His emotional response was fear and trembling. His spiritual response was recognizing himself as a man of unclean lips (v. 5). The response of his will was, "Here am I. Send me!" (v. 8)

God's revelation led to service—not good feelings. Good feelings result from doing God's will. True worship hasn't changed. The revelation leads to response through prayer, song, and self-giving to God and your neighbor. You haven't really worshipped fully until you've given yourself away to God and others! This is true and proper worship (Romans 12:1). True worship requires obeying and serving the One you say you worship. (John 4:23–24).²

How can you make all of life an act of worship today?

Read 1 Thessalonians 4.

187 Worship (2)

God demands your exclusive worship (Exodus 34:14).

Nevertheless, you're tempted to worship things such as your house, success, money, electronic devices, car, "toys," or a church bethel. (Romans 1:25, Micah 5:13).

Worship includes giving God credit for what He's done (Exodus 32:8). It involves bowing down to Him and offering Him sacrifices (2 Kings 17:36). It includes singing praise to Him (Psalm 66:4) and giving Him thanks (2 Chronicles 7:3). You praise God for who He is and thank Him for what He has done.

God is worthy of your worship because He made the heavens. Splendor, majesty, strength, and joy surround Him (1 Chronicles 16:23–27). You bow down and kneel before the Lord because He's your Maker (Psalm 95:6). He's holy (Psalm 99:5), loving, and faithful (Psalm 138:2).

HIS POWER FOR YOUR WEAKNESS

The Magi worshipped Jesus (Matthew 2:11). So did His disciples (Matthew 14:33). The women who went to His tomb (Matthew 28:9). The eleven disciples (Matthew 28:17). The blind man He healed (John 9:38). And all God's angels (Hebrews 1:6). One day at His name every knee will bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that He is Lord (Philippians 2:10–11).

A vital prayer life, regular time in the Scriptures, and a sincere effort to obey God outside the sanctuary equip you to worship Him inside it. The worship fire burns brightest when each believer brings a torch already lit. The worship leader's task is to blow the wind of the Spirit on existing flames. It isn't lighting wet wood!

When you're spiritually sick, you go through worship motions out of obligation or habit. The Father seeks those who worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). True worship requires a willingness to serve, obey, and submit to the Lord. It's motivated by love, gratitude, and thanksgiving for who God is and all He's done. Attitude is more important than architecture. How is more important than where.

Seventy percent of Israel's religious holidays were celebrations (Leviticus 23). Worship includes both joyful celebration and solemn reflection.¹

Is your worship tipped more toward celebration or reflection? How can you improve the balance? Read 1 Thessalonians 5.

Chapter 20

HIS CHURCH FOR YOUR BELONGING

And he is the head of the body, the church.

COLOSSIANS 1:18 NIV

88 What Church Is Really About

The Pew Research Center determined the following top ten reasons Americans attend church services¹:

- To become closer to God (81%)
- To give their children a moral foundation (69%)
- To become a better person (68%)
- For comfort in trouble or sorrow (66%)
- For helpful sermons (59%)
- To be part of a faith community (57%)
- To continue a family tradition (37%)
- To fulfill a sense of obligation (31%)
- To meet new people or socialize (19%)
- To please their family, spouse, or partner (16%)

Attending church helps people feel closer to God. It instructs their children in morality. It makes them better people. It enables them to deal with adversity. It helps them deal with life issues. It makes them feel included. It helps them continue the family tradition. It increases their social network. It keeps significant others off their backs. Most of these are diverse ways of saying, “I go because the ministries of my church meet my needs.”

The better the local church meets the needs of those who attend, the more enthusiastic they are about it. Churches should meet people’s needs. That’s what love does. Assembling with other believers is important (Hebrews 10:24-25). But meeting together isn’t an end in itself. It’s part of a larger purpose. The goal isn’t the long-time survival of individual local churches all around the world. The goal is the long-term survival and expansion of the gospel.

The church is God's vehicle to pass the Christian faith intact from one generation to the next. That includes what to believe and teach (1 Timothy 2:2). It also involves how to live (Philippians 4:9). The church is to equip Jesus' followers to conform to His will and ways generation after generation. Local churches that do that tend to grow. But numerical growth isn't the goal.

Imagine God's will and ways are a baton. The measure of a church is how effectively its members receive that baton (conform to God's will and ways) and pass that baton to the next generation without dropping it.

How is the church like a track and field relay event?

Read 2 Thessalonians 1.

189 Tradition and True Worship

Tradition can hinder true worship. It's a wonderful servant but a terrible master. The Pharisees and scribes noticed Jesus' disciples were eating food with unwashed hands. They were breaking the rules.

Like many traditions today, handwashing began legitimately. The washings in Exodus 30:19–20 taught the priests they needed a pure heart to enter God's presence. Then, they made the symbol a required spiritual exercise for everyone. Finally, handwashing became the focus. They ignored purity before God.

You can easily fall into the same trap today. The Lord commissioned the church to make disciples (Matthew 28:19–20). Many churches are more committed to maintaining and preserving their traditions than making disciples. Jesus condemned the Pharisees for substituting human priorities for God's commandments. Beware of "Churchianity" clothed in lists of what to do and not do.

Jesus explained in Mark 7:18–23 that external things don't defile you. Instead, the thoughts and actions which defile you spring from your rebellious heart. That rebellion against God among church members hinders a church's ministry more than anything else.

Beginning in Mark 7:24, we read about Jesus' venture to Phoenicia. A Gentile woman approached Him. She believed He could cast a demon from her daughter. Jesus appeared indifferent to her need. He seemed to refuse her request because she was a Gentile. She

still believed she could benefit from Jesus' presence. She asked only for crumbs from the table.

Her wit, faith, and humility pleased Jesus. He graciously healed her daughter. What if He would have remained faithful to Jewish traditions? He would have refused her request and said something like, "You're a Gentile. You're not part of the people of God."

What traditions and attitudes in your church exclude people from the family of God? How can you make people unlike you feel welcome?

Read 2 Thessalonians 2.

190 Being the Church (1)

I once pretended to be sick when I was a child to avoid going to church. Within a day or two, I became sick. Was it a coincidence? Let me just say I only did that once!

Going to church isn't the same as being the church. Fans of Jesus go to church. But Jesus is gathering followers, not recruiting fans. His followers are the church, His hands, and his feet on earth 24/7. Being the church is more than attending worship services regularly.

Perhaps, you're a new believer and have never gone or rarely gone to church. Attending regularly suggests real progress. I say "suggests" because only God knows what you do and why you do it. Doing the right thing for the right reason is challenging. Why you go to worship services is at least as important as going. King David rejoiced when he could go to the Lord's house (Psalm 122:1). It wasn't a duty, but a joy! Today the Lord lives in His followers. When you meet with them, you meet God in a way you don't when you worship Him privately. In God's presence is fullness of joy (Psalm 16:11). Worshipping Jesus with other followers will bring you joy!

The church isn't a building with pews, theater seats, or folding chairs. It isn't where a few perform, and many criticize. It's a living organism created by God—the body of which Christ is head (Colossians 1:18). Being the church means living interdependently with other believers and dependently on Christ. You can't call yourself a football player unless you're part of a team. Football is a team sport. You shouldn't call yourself a Christian unless you're an active contributor to Christ's church. Christianity isn't an individual

endeavor. Members of a football team depend on one another to complete assigned roles for the team to be successful. So it is with the body of Christ, the church.

How do you explain the difference between going to church and being the church? Read 2 Thessalonians 3.

191 Being the Church (2)

You need the other members of the church. The other members need you (1 Corinthians 12:17–21). You're like an index finger. The hand (church) can't function properly without you. You can't function properly apart from your designated place in the hand (church). The hand is home. Both the hand and the index finger need a vital connection to the head (Christ).

Christian fellowship means sharing together. As a believer, you share with other believers the life of Christ. You share the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. You share cleansing from sin. You share a commitment to follow Him. You share membership in His body and much more.

Fellowship implies union and oneness. The marriage relationship pictures it. Two become one in a marriage ceremony. Likewise, all believers become one through the Holy Spirit's baptizing them into the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13). As a result you also have fellowship with the Father and with Jesus Christ, His Son (1 John 1:3). The fullness of God's life flows simultaneously through the bonds of relationships between God and believers and among believers.

What did church life look like for the first 3,000 Christians baptized into the church? What did it mean to be the church? They dedicated themselves to fellowship. They dedicated themselves to the apostles' teaching. They committed themselves to the breaking of bread (Lord's Supper) and to prayer (Acts 2:42). All these were channels for the flow of God's life.

Ephesians 4 describes the flow of God's life in the church and its purpose. Being part of God's church includes your being completely humble, gentle, and patient. It involves bearing with other believers in love (v. 2). It includes your concerted effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit (v. 3). It comprises the using of the grace gifts

Christ has apportioned to do works of service that build up the church (vv. 7–12). It includes the expression of His fullness to the world (v. 13).

In what ways have you experienced the flow of God's life through you?

Read 1 Timothy 1.

192 Being the Church (3)

The church reflects Christ more accurately than you can alone. It's like a car, and you, its tire. You find your purpose at the wheel of the car. The car needs you to run properly. Don't try to live the Christian life alone. You must collaborate with other believers. You can accomplish more together than you can imagine according to the power that's at work in all of you (Ephesians 3:20).

The word of God equips you to carry God's life to others. It's living and active (Hebrews 4:12). As you input it into your life, it changes how you think (Romans 12:2). Your relationships become increasingly healthy and filled full of God's life. The church teaches and preaches God's word to build your spiritual muscles. It prepares you for works of service (1 Peter 2:2, Ephesians 4:12).

In a word, love summarizes the flow of life between God and you. Between you and other believers. Between you and your neighbors. Between you and your enemies. You demonstrate this love as you use your spiritual gift(s) (1 Corinthians 12:4–5). As you serve others (John 13:14–16). As you spur one another on to ever-increasing love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24).

Love flowing between and among believers is the distinguishing mark of Jesus' followers (John 13:34–35). That's why believers mustn't give up meeting together with other believers (Hebrews 10:25). You can love other believers only as you associate with and relate to them. Attending a local church advertises your allegiance to Jesus to those who don't believe in Him (Matthew 10:32).

Going to church is different from being the church. Jesus' fans go to church. His followers are the church. The fans are like insulation. The followers like copper wire. God's current life flows through the wires, not the insulation. You want God's life to flow through you. I know I do. Be the church!

Why is being a Jesus fan no substitute for being a Jesus follower? Which are you? Read 1 Timothy 2.

193 Do I Need the Church?

“I don’t have to go to church to be a Christian,” she told me more than 25 years ago. Is that true? She had a misguided idea of her Christian responsibility. Barring health issues and other limiting factors, spiritually healthy believers go to church. But not all who go to church are Christians. The challenge is not to go to church but to be the church. That’s true whether you’re a vital part of a 1000-person assembly or a twelve-person house church. Christianity isn’t just a “Jesus and me” affair.

Suppose I claim to be a football player. You might ask, “For what team do you play?” I say, “I don’t play for any team.” That’s just like saying “I don’t have to go to church to be a Christian.” Football is a team sport. Becoming a Christian automatically makes you part of Jesus’ team. You have a place and a responsibility on His team.

To use another analogy, Jesus is the head of the body, the church (Colossians 1:18). You’re a member of that body with a specific responsibility. “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7, NIV). That is, each believer has one or more spiritual gifts given to strengthen the whole church. Jesus chooses spiritual leaders to equip the church’s members. They’re to build up His body toward unity and maturity to reflect His fullness (Ephesians 4:11–13). “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” (Ephesians 4:16, NIV).

The church is God’s instrument through which you fulfill your destiny and purpose. You need the church like the food you eat and the air you breathe. Life isn’t about you. It’s about achieving the purpose for which God created you. For that, you need the church.

What is the next step you can take to be God’s church instead of just going to church? Read 1 Timothy 3.

194 Faith-Linked

Who has brought out the best in you? My father influenced me more than my mother. She died when I was seven. Shortly thereafter, at sixty-four, my never-married Aunt Elizabeth left her job. She moved into our home. She cared for five boys ages one, five, seven, seven, and thirteen. Knowing us boys, I wouldn't have volunteered for that retirement assignment! Through her example, she taught me how to serve others unselfishly. My father taught me how to work. He showed me how to drive a car. He emphasized the importance of keeping my promises. He taught me countless other lessons I absorbed and imitated unconsciously.

Who has brought out the best in you spiritually? John Gruver and Dick Stum taught me Christian fundamentals. Blair Cook helped steer me toward ministry as a vocation. Josh McDowell, Paul Little, C. S. Lewis, A. W. Tozer, and John Piper shaped me through their writings. Walter Kaiser, Jr, Donald Carson, and David Hesselgrave, among others, helped prepare me for pastoral ministry. Pastor Charlie Yost and others encouraged my writing efforts.

“Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7, NIV). God gifts you to minister to others effectively. He's given me the ability to teach and to write. Those who've shaped me spiritually have enhanced my ability to help others.

My computer, linked to the internet, has allowed hundreds of thousands of people thousands of miles away to read what I write. A cell phone's battery must connect to a power source and recharge to continue operating. You benefit from linking to the unique gifts of grace God has given other believers. They benefit from connecting to your gifts. You live most effectively when you're linked with other Christians and “spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10:24, NIV). Faith-linking is the heart of Christian fellowship.

Who has brought out the best in you spiritually? How? In whose lives are you making spiritual investments? How? Read 1 Timothy 4.

195 Cyber Sunday

Cyber Monday got me thinking about the possibilities of a Cyber Sunday. Of course, certain rules apply. All parishioners must bring a phone or tablet to the church bethel. They must keep their eyes glued to it from the beginning to the end of the service. Those not fluent in the cyber world must bring a child or grandchild who is. Church officials forbid eye contact or talking with other live persons at the service. Breaking this rule will result in ex-communication from the church. They encourage texting and tweets. They must not involve others sitting in the sanctuary.

Everyone watches a live-streamed church service that most appeals to them. Ideally, everyone will be viewing different services. Church leaders value diversity. They permit singing along. But please, no harmony. Streamed services vary in length. All may leave whenever the worship services they're watching conclude. Church leaders forbid interpersonal connection while exiting the sanctuary.

You're wondering about exceptional deals on Cyber Sunday. There's a 50 percent off sale on the Ten Commandments. Choose the five you'll obey for the next year. Forget the rest. Church officials consider you a regular attendee if you're present for Cyber Sunday. There's also a 90 percent reduction offer on the tithe. A like discount applies to the time you must serve before church leaders consider you an active member and eligible for the church's governing board.

Meanwhile, Jesus told us to love one another as He has loved us (John 13:34–35). His word tells us to spur one another on to love and to do good (Hebrews 10:24). We're to serve the Lord with zeal and spiritual fervor (Romans 12:11). So, does your church look more like the last paragraph or the first three (adjusted for exaggeration)?

*How can modern technology hinder worshiping God in spirit and in truth?
Read 1 Timothy 5.*

196 We Got This!

“I got this” is the motto of those with self-confidence. That's been my usual approach to overcoming day-to-day problems and challenges. “I got this” works better than “This got me.” If I apply unrelenting pressure on problems or challenges, they usually bend,

break or dissolve. That's often worked for me in the realm of things. That's how I solve math problems. It's how I fill out complicated forms. However, "I got this" has significant limitations for me as a believer. It immediately takes on water in stormy seas. It's a sinking ship in the spiritual realm. That's because apart from Jesus I can do nothing. Nothing, that is, that will make any lasting spiritual impact (John 15:5).

"He got this" summarizes "Let go and let God." Now, in the spiritual realm, that's better than "I got this." As I've already suggested, that sinks like a stone. Faith trusts that God will do what He promises (Hebrews 11:6). Nothing is too hard for Him (Genesis 18:14, Jeremiah 32:27). He's called the Sovereign LORD 210 times in Ezekiel alone. His power is supreme and ultimate. He does what He wants when He wants. But "He got this" doesn't accurately describe how God usually advances His Kingdom on earth.

"We got this," is God's way. God, other believers, and I are all part of "we." Jesus is the head of the body of the church (Colossians 1:18), which includes all believers. Each believer plays a vital part in accomplishing God's will on earth (1 Corinthians 12:12–30). Jesus is the head. We're His hands and feet. It takes a team to overcome. You need God and other believers. Without God, you can't, but without you, God usually won't. He uses you to accomplish His will. He didn't permanently etch His word in the sky. He doesn't write His will in the heart of everyone. He could've. He's used people to communicate it and live it out. I shouldn't have to repeatedly change gears from "I got this" to "we got this." "We got this" is the only gear I really need. How about you?

In what gear do you normally live—I got this, this got me, He got this, or we got this? What adjustment do you need to make? Read 1 Timothy 6.

197 The Church Puzzle Parable (1)

A jigsaw puzzle reminds you of the church. Interlocking parts form a beautiful picture. "Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12, NIV).

It takes many pieces to make a complete jigsaw picture. "As it is, there are many parts, but one body" (1 Corinthians 12:20, NIV).

Many healthy believers living in loving harmony represent Christ more accurately than any individual believer does. Including the pastor. Matthew 5:14 (NIV) says, “You (plural) are the light of the world.” In other words, “All of you together are a picture of Christ for the world to see.”

Those who aren’t part of the church see how you relate to one another and to them. Jesus has all the gifts of the Spirit. Your pastor doesn’t. Neither does any other single individual. We need all the gifts of the Spirit. We need the fruit of the Spirit. Through both, we reflect Jesus as accurately as possible. The part of the picture that you compose is a bit fuzzy. That’s because you’re less than a perfect copy of your Savior. But put the pieces together in their proper places. Love other believers. Then, the picture might not be Michelangelo’s quality, but others will see Jesus.

God is in charge of puzzle design. Some churches have twenty-five pieces. Some have five hundred or more. Some of us think we’re twenty-five-piece puzzles when God designed us to be one hundred-piece puzzles. There are more pieces still in the box than we realize. Assembly of the puzzle is an ongoing process. All puzzles (churches) are equally important. God designs them all to impact the people who live in their communities.

He designs them to be a picture of Jesus. God communicated His nature by sending His Son to earth as a man. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14, NIV). In our time, God sends a church to accomplish the same purpose. “Now you (plural) are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Corinthians 12:27, NIV).

What part of the church puzzle are you? Why is demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit essential to complete your role? Read 2 Timothy 1.

198 The Church Puzzle Parable (2)

Every piece of the church puzzle is necessary. “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Corinthians 12:27, NIV). The picture of Christ that the church puzzle represents won’t be clear if seventy-five percent of the puzzle pieces aren’t

involved. Instead, they're criticizing or spectating from the comfort of the puzzle box.

The church puzzle includes people who are God's church, not just going to church. Are you trusting in Jesus as your personal Savior? If so, being God's church means ministering to others. Serving others isn't optional for Christ's followers.

The puzzle pieces aren't in the box by accident. God has called and equipped you. You're to play a significant role in advancing His rule on earth. "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7, NIV). Your purpose is to be the best steward you can of the gift(s) the Spirit has given you. Nothing more, nothing less, nothing else. A believer who doesn't yet know his/her spiritual gifts is abnormal. It's like mechanics who don't recognize the tools in their toolbox. If they do, they don't know how to use them. The sooner that's corrected, the better.

Your gifts include your spiritual passion, spiritual gifts, and temperament. For help in identifying these three, see *Becoming an Enthusiastic Church*, Chapter 7, Healthy Ministry (<https://www.christiangrowthresources.com/becoming-an-enthusiastic-church>). These gifts are part of your divine design. They point you toward your ministry. In addition, I encourage every church to list and regularly update all its ministries. Job descriptions for each ministry help those still in the puzzle box become contributing parts of the picture of Christ.

What's your spiritual passion? What is your spiritual gift(s)? What's your temperament? Read 2 Timothy 2.

199 The Church Puzzle Parable (3)

Church puzzle pieces have a limited life expectancy. God, collaborating with church leaders, must replace them over time. Otherwise, a local church will cease to exist. Do you know the best way to add puzzle pieces to the puzzle piece box? Meet the felt needs of those who aren't yet part of the church. Some whose needs you meet will become future church members and leaders. The church helps new members mature spiritually. It empowers them to meet the needs of others.

HIS POWER FOR YOUR WEAKNESS

Three distinct groups of people are potentially replacement pieces in the church puzzle box. But they aren't yet in the church puzzle. The first group consists of believers in Jesus who attend church services. But they aren't regularly ministering to others through ministries of the word or service. If you're in this group, allow God to use you as He desires. Ask a spiritual leader to help you. Find your place in ministry based on your spiritual gift(s), spiritual passion, and personality.

Seekers who are already attending church services compose the second group. They're not yet believers in Jesus Christ. But they're seeking truth. Jesus is that truth (John 14:6). If you're in that group, God calls you to turn from living for yourself to living for Him. He invites you to receive His gifts. They include forgiveness, eternal life, and power all wrapped up in the Person of Jesus. You can receive Him through the following prayer. The words aren't magic. They just indicate a heart that is ready to follow Jesus. "Lord Jesus I need you. I know I'm a sinner who deserves Your condemnation. Thank you for taking my place on the cross. I open the door of my life. I receive you as my Savior and Lord. Thank you for forgiving my sins and making me a child of God. Help me find my place in the church puzzle." Tell a spiritual leader about your decision. Ask how you can grow in your relationship with Christ.

The third group of pieces in the box represents people who haven't yet received Jesus as their personal Savior and Lord. They aren't attending any church. Jesus commissioned the church to reach them through its ministry. It needs prayer and intentional strategies to do so. By God's grace, next year at this time they'll be part of the puzzle too!

It takes many pieces to make a complete church puzzle. Every piece of the church puzzle is necessary. Church puzzle pieces have a limited life expectancy. Local churches must replace them over time, or they will cease to exist.

What's your next step toward being a blessing as a piece of the church puzzle? Read 2 Timothy 3.

Chapter 21

HIS VIRTUES FOR YOUR BROKENNESS

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.

GALATIANS 5:22-23

200 A New Love DNA

Dear Bill,

I've been terribly sad since I broke our engagement. Please forgive me. May I come back? I love you more than I can say!

Rhonda

PS Congratulations on winning the Powerball jackpot!

God loves you because of who He is, not who you are or what He can get from you. You easily overestimate how loving you are. You're like a guy who looks at a mirror and sees a better-looking person than anyone else sees that day! God chooses to love you—warts, pimples, unpleasant habits, and all. Love is more a choice than a feeling. You choose to love God, your neighbor, and other believers. How do you move from choosing to love to cruising in love?

Let's consider the first of five ways to grow in love. God designed you to channel His love rather than generate your own. Human love is like swamp water. It smells like rotten eggs. Your motivations are often self-serving (See Rhonda above!). God's love is like pure, sparkling spring water. Better ingredients, better love, Abba Father! "Dear friends, Let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God" (1 John 4:7, NIV).

When you're born again, you receive Jesus' love DNA. You're born again to love! Jesus continually strengthens you to love God, your neighbors, and other believers (Philippians 4:13). The result of the Holy Spirit's control is love that looks like rivers of living water flowing from you (John 7:38)!

How has Jesus' love DNA made a difference in your life? Read 2 Tim 4.

201 Love on a Tightrope

More than 25 years ago, two of my brothers and I went canoeing on a creek. Two of us sat in the red Coleman canoe. The third climbed aboard without centering his weight. In a split second, my twin brother and I flipped from breathing air to blowing bubbles in the water under the canoe. Love, like a canoe, or a tightrope walk, requires balance.

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.'" (Matthew 22:37–39, NIV). The tightrope walk of love balances loving God, other believers, and unbelieving neighbors in need. For me, loving unbelieving “neighbors” must be a higher priority. I’m trying to be more intentional in that area.

Another unbalancing force is centering your life on someone or something other than God. Idolatry makes a God-substitute life’s tightrope and defining passion. I’ve thought often about fishing. I’m known for it. I’ve spent considerable money on it. I’ve given it more attention than it deserves. I’m slowly learning that fishing might make a meal but not a life. God will give you the grace to keep your life centered on Him as your defining passion (1 Corinthians 10:13–14). I suggest a healthy balance reveals itself at the end of every day. It exists when you can specifically describe how you loved God. How you helped another believer. How you served someone in need.

What threatens God's supremacy in your life? How can you keep it in a subordinate place? Read Titus 1.

202 Why Playing It Safe Never Works in Love

When threatened, box turtles withdraw into their shells. You probably have box turtle genes! By contrast, love, like faith, takes risks. It becomes open and hurtable. Unless the box turtle becomes vulnerable, it’ll never cross the road. It won’t taste the sweet berries on the other side.

Loving openness begins with trust. You honestly speak the truth in a loving way (Ephesians 4:15). You share your brokenness and where you hurt. You tell others why they're special to you. You really listen to others to understand both their thoughts and feelings. You extend grace. You cut people slack when they disappoint you. You forgive those who've hurt you. You don't hold their sins against them. You're transparent. You're who you appear to be. You let others see your heart by sharing what you value. You're compassionate. You feel others' pain. You share your time and material blessings with others. You laugh together with others and show them you enjoy their company.

The easiest place to be open is with another trusted person or a small group. It's scary and threatening to stick your neck out. Like most right things, it's easier to talk about than do. People have hurt you in the past when you were vulnerable. You don't feel safe when you're hurtable. But, if you don't stick your neck out, you'll never get to the sweet berries on the other side of the road!

What risk will you take to become a more loving person? Read Titus 2.

203 God's Joy

Joy is the elation you feel on the mountaintops of life. It's visible on your face. I felt it when I got an "A" on a test. I experienced it when I won a track and field medal. It lights my life when I've caught an unusually large fish. I even feel it when Penn State beats Ohio State in football. I experienced it when my children excelled in school. I've felt it when my grandchildren have shown signs of more mature decision-making. Mood-altering drugs can artificially induce joy. But like ice cream on a 95-degree day, it quickly melts away.

Joy flourishes in the thin, clear, bracing air of mountaintop experiences. I've spent years of my life in valley smog. Can you identify with that? When you strike another pothole, the wheels of your life start wobbling alarmingly. Joy is noticeably absent. Where is it when a loved one dies? When you're diagnosed with cancer? When the IRS questions your tax return?

God's joy thrives in the valley. It's invisible. It stares at adversity face-to-face. It doesn't blink. It can fill your heart with peace when tears cloud your eyes at a graveside service. God's joy is ocean-deep

contentment, serenity, and peace despite calamity. When my father died unexpectedly in 2015, my eyes were wet. But I also felt a deep peace that he was with the Lord he loved. God's joy comforted me where normal joy couldn't tread.

God's joy comes only from Jesus. He's the sole distributor. It's four-wheel-drive joy. It enables emotional traction whatever the circumstances. Jesus is speaking in John 15:11, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete" (NIV). God's joy is Jesus' joy. His Spirit generates it in the hearts of all who surrender control of their lives to Him (Galatians 5:22). For me, joy is a luxury, God's joy a necessity.

When have you experienced God's joy in trying circumstances? Read Titus 3.

204 Got Joy?

Knowing how track and field throwers do their best can help you maximize joy. You might guess they'd throw farthest by all out, 110% effort. You'd be exactly wrong! Maximum distance is a by-product of relaxed, precise execution of proper throwing form. Trying to "kill it" tightens up muscles. They don't work together. It produces disappointing results. Likewise, you minimize joy when it's your goal. You maximize it when you focus on something else—knowing God and fulfilling His purpose for your life.

Joy is ocean-deep contentment, serenity, and peace. It's anchored in positive thoughts about who God is. About what He has done. The more you get God, the more you get joy. By contrast, believing lies about God, yourself, and others spawn negative thinking.

How do you connect with God and what He's doing? You learn, trust, and obey His promises. For example, because the LORD is your shepherd (Psalm 23), you'll have everything you need, no matter what. Even when the wheels of life are falling off, He's taking care of you. Trusting Him brings joy and peace despite your circumstances. He's good and righteous (Psalm 145:7). He's your Savior (Habakkuk 3:18). He qualified you to share in His inheritance (Colossians 1:12). He answers prayer (John 16:24). He will raise you from the dead (Isaiah 26:19). That's just the tip of the promise iceberg. Joy flows

when you see life from God's perspective. You feel it when you actively trust and obey Him in all life's joys and difficulties. The more you get God, the more you get joy!

*When have you experienced joy as a result of fulfilling God's purposes?
Read Philemon.*

205 Embrace Joy's Family

My daughter is the expert on our family tree. I didn't marry Diane McAdams in isolation. She had relational connections. Diane invited people to our wedding I didn't know or hardly knew. It was the same for her with my relatives and friends. My daughter Krista married into the Carlen family. As a result, my grandchildren have DNA that traces back to Captain Robert Beheathland. He was an original settler in Jamestown, VA in 1607.

Similarly, God's joy has a family. It includes faith, obedience, thanksgiving, love, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. You might recognize the last eight members. Along with joy, they're part of the fruit of the Spirit family (Galatians 5:22–23). They're vitally connected to the Holy Spirit and each other. They have the same spiritual DNA. When a storm disconnects the electrical power to your house, none of the lights work. When the power returns, they all do. The Holy Spirit's control in your life is the power source for the fruit of the Spirit. He also powers faith, obedience, and thanksgiving.

All the members of joy's extensive family are God's gifts. They're also commanded. For example, obedience is God's gift, "For it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13, NIV). It's also commanded, "If you love me, keep my commands" (John 14:15, NIV). The same is true about all the other family members. The by-product of all of them is joy. Choose to trust and obey God, and you choose joy. Choose to do the kind deed, and you choose joy. Choose to give thanks in all circumstances, and you choose joy (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

How will the choices you make today provide an environment where joy abounds? Read Hebrews 1.

206 Do You Have God's Peace?

In 2020 the challenge was to get and keep personal peace in a COVID-19-threatened world. About 1990 I was fishing with Ernie in a small boat. I was running the outboard motor. Ernie was in the front of the boat. Suddenly, extraordinarily fierce winds rushed upon us. We were about eight hundred meters from the marina. The swells quickly built to four to five feet. I slowly, fearfully guided my small boat toward safety. We climbed each steep wave and crashed down time after time. We made very slow progress. Ernie was supernaturally serene. I was worried the boat could capsize at any moment. Ernie calmly asked, "Jack, would you like a sandwich?" Ernie was a Christian with peace down to his bone marrow!

Peace in the Old Testament includes security (Psalm 4:8). It involves contentment (Isaiah 26:3). It encompasses prosperity (Psalm 122:6–7) and the absence of war (1 Samuel 7:14). In the New Testament, Jesus offers you His own peace (John 14:27). God's peace is inner tranquility and poise. It's a combination of hope, trust, and mind and soul quiet. You can have it because God made peace through Jesus' blood shed on the cross (Colossians 1:20). I first experienced it immediately after I made peace with God by inviting Jesus into my life as my Savior and Lord.

Feeling God's peace depends on thinking about what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable (Philippians 4:8–9). A disciplined mind shepherds a disciplined life. The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life displace your peace. Your worries reflect how you think. No problem is too big for God. An extra-extra-extra-large, trustworthy God in you should leave no room for worry.

Maintaining God's peace depends on doing what's right (Isaiah 32:17–18). "There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (Romans 2:9–10, NIV). Salvation by grace through faith produces a doing-right lifestyle. A life-shaping belief underlies a peace-saturated life.

When has God enabled you to live in the sphere of peace? Read Hebrews 2.

Chapter 22

HIS ENERGY FOR YOUR FRUITFULNESS

To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.

COLOSSIANS 1:29 NIV

207 Too Soon to Quit

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, 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," (Hebrews 12:1, NIV).

The track and field throwers I coach frequently become frustrated. I tell them it's always too soon to quit. A ninth grader was very disheartened in one practice in the fall of 2007. She stopped throwing for the day. She just couldn't take any more frustration. She didn't give up, however. She kept on working at it. By graduation, her perseverance had produced five Pennsylvania track and field state championship medals.

Your perceived lack of spiritual growth can frustrate you. You seem to wrestle with the same besetting sins. You see little spiritual fruit. You wish for dozens of bunches of beautiful grapes. You see only a couple of wrinkled raisins! You need perseverance. Those with average ability who persevere eventually overcome. They often accomplish more than those with far greater abilities who easily give up.

The white oak's average life span of three hundred years begins with an acorn. It germinates and holds its ground. In about twenty years it begins producing acorns. At eighty the tree produces thousands of acorns. It's always too soon to quit!

When have you given up on something that you now regret? When did you persevere even though the going was tough? Read Hebrews 3.

208 Putting up with Weird People

People's weirdness gets on your nerves. Your weirdness gets on theirs. We're all weird—just in different places! I talk to and sometimes get mad at things that aren't "cooperating." That's just the iceberg tip of my weirdness. You have your own collection of odd habits, don't you? Forbearance is patiently bearing with others' oddness with the right attitude. Agitated silence isn't forbearance. I'm better at not speaking a critical word than not thinking a critical thought. Both are important. God gets glory when sinful, weird people like you can bear with, forgive, and love other believers. That's not easy, is it? Forbearance is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23).

You're naturally unmerciful, proud, self-centered, impatient, and quick to anger. You have a 1-millimeter fuse. You need a 1-meter one. The Holy Spirit's power is your fuse extender (Galatians 5:22).

Putting up with others and forgiving them are related. "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13, NIV). Christ's person and work are the basis for both forgiving and forbearing. You forgive and bear with others because Christ forgives and bears with you.

You're chosen, holy, and loved by God (Colossians 3:12). As a royal child, you must treat others better than they deserve. That's because God treats you better than you deserve. The Holy Spirit in you enables you to do so as you surrender to His will and ways. It's a life-long process.

God uses relationships to make you more like Jesus. You can't put up with weird people on your own. But you can through the Holy Spirit's power. Weirdness is like smelly garbage in relationships. It's natural to magnify the smell of others' weirdness. It's easy to turn away from the one generating it. You don't want them doing that to you, do you? God gets glory when sinful, weird people like you can put up with, forgive, and love other believers through His enabling power.

How well do you patiently put up with others' oddness without agitated silence? What's the next step? Read Hebrews 4.

209 Are You Impatient?

Your weird habits don't seem weird to you. But they get on others' nerves. I'm more patient with people than with things. At times I imagine inanimate objects are out to get me. That's industrial strength oddness! After you laugh at my weirdness, consider your own. Do you save things you'll never need? Do you talk to pets like they're people? Do irrational fears limit you? Do you talk to yourself? The weird gene reveals itself in thousands of ways!

Forbearance is humbly and compassionately putting up with others' weird ways. "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13). It's often hard to separate sin and weirdness. Because you're a sinner, you sin. That requires forgiveness in relationships. God gets the glory when weird and sinful people can love one another.

Christ's person and work are the basis for forgiving and forbearing. How you live should flow from being chosen, holy, and loved by God (Colossians 3:12). A royal son or daughter should live like one. That's challenging. You're naturally unmerciful, proud, self-centered, impatient, and quick to anger.

Patience is behind forbearance and forgiveness. Behind patience is compassion and humility. Patience trickles and then flows from an increasingly compassionate and humble heart. Being chosen, holy, and loved by God should lengthen your anger fuse. You've received God's undeserved favor. You must pass it on to others.

Forbearing means putting up with one another. Others' odd traits irritate you like a stone in your shoe. But you don't want your weirdness and sins held against you. "Love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8, NIV). Love "always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (1 Corinthians 13:7-8, NIV). Forbearance means treating others better than they deserve. That's because God treats you better than you deserve.

How do you do it? You pass on to others the grace you receive from God. The Spirit of God in you treats others through you as He treats you. That's better than either you or they deserve. You have to submit and trust Him to work through you. The fruit of the Spirit is ... forbearance (Galatians 5:22). When you yield to the Spirit's will

and ways, forbearance mysteriously grows out of the soil of your impatience.

Why are you obligated to forgive others and put up with their irritating ways? Read Hebrews 5.

210 The Impressive Power of Kindness

I remember reciting the Scout Law at every Boy Scout meeting. “A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.” Suppose the Scout Law was the only law of the land. Everyone follows it consistently. The USA would be a much safer and more united place! Consider how consistently being kind could revolutionize your life.

Kindness is choosing to do what will benefit others. Even if it costs you time, money, or energy. As it turns out, scientists have conclusively proven that being kind not only aids those you help. It also improves your life as well. Kind actions release hormones in your body. They make you feel good. They lower your blood pressure. Intentional kindness expands and strengthens healthy relationships with others. That’s correlated with living longer and reducing your stress, depression, anxiety, and internal inflammation.¹

These personal benefits of kindness demonstrate something. You’re created to be kind. You function best when you are. Kindness lubricates interpersonal relationships. It greases your own physical, emotional, and psychological gears. You’re created in God’s image. That includes kindness. Being kind to your enemies shows you’re a child of God. He is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. He gives them rain from heaven and crops to feed them and fill their hearts with joy (Luke 6:35, Acts 4:17). Imagine how applying that principle would transform our political climate and national division! Kindness starts with you. But the good news is that it’s communicable. Those who witness or receive kindness are more likely to pass it on to others.

God intends that His kindness will lead you to center your life on Him (Romans 2:4). You are to be like Him by being kind to others (1 Corinthians 13:4, Ephesians 4:32, Colossians 3:12). That’s best accomplished by letting God’s Spirit be kind to others through you (Galatians 5:22).

How will focusing on being kind today benefit both you and others?

Read Hebrews 6.

211 Kindness at Home

My father went out to dinner with a friend. When they finished eating, he went to pay the bill. He discovered a stranger had already taken care of it. Such gracious demonstrations get your attention. That's because you're often not kind to others, especially your own family members. You frequently shift out of kindness gear when you walk in your front door. Those studying the basics of social distancing during a pandemic could learn from a couple that has been married for more than seven years!

Stress often brings unkindness to the surface. When life's pressures squeeze you like a tube of toothpaste, your frustrations surface. You lash out at others. When you're unkind, you're forgetting God's kindness to you. "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" (Titus 3:4–5, NIV). Projecting a superior attitude is never appropriate when you're dispensing kindness. Only the garment of humility perfectly fits kindness distributors. They're pock-marked with failures. There's no room for a better-than-you attitude!

The New Testament word for kindness describes gentleness, goodness, uprightness, generosity, and graciousness. It's an attribute of God (Titus 3:4). It's a characteristic of true love (1 Corinthians 13:4). Like love, kindness isn't based on the worthiness of the object but on the character of the giver.

God's kindness should spur you on to be kind to others, especially other believers. "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32, NIV). God's purpose is that rivers of kindness will flow from you. They're fed by the inexhaustible aquifers of His kindness to you. The Holy Spirit empowers the whole venture (Galatians 5:22). Be a sparkling mountain stream of kindness as a way of life. Don't settle to be a faucet of kindness that's turned off or on at will! Christianity that works, works at home.

Why is being kind at home more of a challenge than being kind in other settings? Read Hebrews 7.

212 The Kind Hands People

My wife's hands are five-star kindness dispensers! I'll return to that shortly. I went to the supermarket to buy a chicken. I was adding it to the vegetable soup I was making. Ahead of me in the checkout line, a man was paying for his groceries. A lady was waiting with her items out of the cart. She was ready to check out. She kindly invited me to go ahead of her. I thanked her immediately. I thanked her again before I left. Kindness lubricates human relationships. Treat others as you want them to treat you. In heaven, it'll be the universal language. The Scout Handbook says, "Of all the points in the Scout Law, if the world at large experienced an overall increase in the level of kindness, it would have the most impact."¹ My wife's hands have done tens of thousands of kind things for me and others since we first met. That's no exaggeration.

If kindness were a fruit, no one would be allergic to it! It is, in fact, the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). God supplies it. But you must dispense it. King David asked, "Is there no one still alive from the house of Saul to whom I can show God's kindness?" (2 Samuel 9:3, NIV). God entrusts you with the responsibility of dispensing His kindness to others. It's a practical demonstration of His love. You choose to push down on the hand soap dispenser to transfer a dab to your hands. Likewise, you must choose to be the Holy Spirit's kindness dispenser. Even though your mental and physical capacities might diminish with age, you can excel at dispensing kindness as long as you live!

Be God's kindness dispenser at least once today. Read Hebrews 8.

213 Are You a Good Person?

My second-grade report card defined B as good and A as excellent. I had at least one B+, which means, at times, I was better than good! I even had a couple of A's in penmanship. I suspect my teacher's eyesight wasn't better than good!

Biblical goodness dwells on a higher plane than the goodness of ice cream. Human goodness is unimpressive. That's because it can't measure up to God's goodness standard, the life of Jesus Christ.

HIS POWER FOR YOUR WEAKNESS

The Old Testament rarely mentions human goodness in a positive light. By contrast, it calls God's goodness worthy of praise four times in Psalm 107 alone. He's abundant in goodness and truth (Exodus 34:6). Repeatedly, it exalts God's goodness and describes it in glowing terms. It shines gloriously like the sun. Goodness expresses how God relates to His people. He has laid up great goodness for those who fear Him (Psalm 31:19).

Goodness is choosing the right and moral good while rejecting wrong and moral evil. God is actively, aggressively, and zealously committed to doing good. He takes the initiative in helping you (Romans 5:8). God's mercy, graciousness, patience, forgiveness, and justice all express His goodness.

Goodness is more than abstaining from evil. It's knowing and doing the right thing. You display God's goodness when you're merciful, forgiving, gracious, just, patient, generous, and morally pure. You show it through a compassionate heart. You demonstrate it when you relieve the suffering of all kinds of people, especially fellow believers (Galatians 6:10).

God oozes goodness. He wants you to do the same (Exodus 34:6). Your goodness flows out of life right with and yielded to Him. The Holy Spirit in you produces it (Galatians 5:22–23). Virtue and helpfulness characterize it. It draws other humans to God like iron to a magnet (Matthew 5:16). You're a goodness magnet! You're most useful, not on the refrigerator doors of a sanctuary seat, but on the highways and byways of life.

Intentionally demonstrate God's goodness to others at least once today so He gets the glory. Read Hebrews 9.

214 Keeping Your Promises

In early 1915 Ernest Shackleton took a lifeboat and traveled eight hundred miles to a whaling station on South Georgia Island. He went to get help to rescue his crew marooned on uninhabited Elephant Island. He promised his crew he'd return. They believed him. Eight months later he came back to Elephant Island. He was faithful.

Faithfulness is dependability, trustworthiness, and reliability. Truth is faithfulness' foundation. Jesus is full of grace and truth (John

1:14). He keeps His promises. Your reputation depends on how well you keep your promises. Moreover, if you call yourself a Christian, God's reputation depends on it too.

Faithfulness has a hand and glove relationship with faith. Faith needs an object. The key question is, "Is the object of your faith worthy of your trust?" Christian faith is simply acting on God's character and promises. When God says He'll provide, He does. When He says He'll forgive, He does. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9, NIV). When He promises He'll never leave you (Hebrews 13:5), He doesn't. Your eternal destiny rests on God's faithfulness.

God is faithfulness' gold standard. "He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart" (Psalm 91:4, NIV). "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful" (Hebrews 10:23, NIV). He's forever trustworthy.

By contrast, human faithfulness is rarer than a four-leaf clover. Even Christians often don't keep their promises. The fruit of the Spirit is faithfulness (Galatians 5:22–23). Therefore, you should keep your word to others. Even when it's inconvenient, uncomfortable, difficult, or costly. How do you up your game? Trust the Holy Spirit to produce faithfulness in you while doing your best to be faithful. Give the Holy Spirit the driver's seat of your life. Make keeping your promises a priority.

Why is keeping your promises important for both your and God's reputation? Read Hebrews 10.

215 Gentleness – Not What You Think

Gentleness is strength plus courage plus restraint. It's not a weakness. It's not spineless submission. It's not putting yourself down. No task is too low for gentle people. They're like Olympic weightlifters who clean toilets. They're like a plow horse responsive to a farmer's guidance. Their strength is under control. They're like an elephant's trunk which can rip branches from trees yet pick up a single blade of grass.

Gentle Christians yield to God. They're teachable and responsive to Him. They're humble, respectful, and polite toward others. They're not angry, vengeful, or self-glorifying. They allow gentle and humble Jesus to live through them. They remain securely connected to Him (Matthew 11:29, John 15:5).

Staying connected to Him is vital. Plants rooted in fertile, well-watered soil produce abundant fruit. Staying connected to Jesus results in much fruit that will remain. Gentleness is among them (Galatians 5:22–23). Allow Jesus to live His gentle life through you. Then your words and actions will bring blessing to others instead of pain.

Paul appeals to you by the gentleness and sweet reasonableness of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:1). In Galatians 6:1 he tells you to gently restore those trapped in sin. He adds that a life worthy of your calling is completely humble and gentle (Ephesians 4:2). He tells you to show humble gentleness toward everyone (Titus 3:2). Control your feelings while being always ready to help the needy. James teaches us that humble gentleness flows from the spring of wisdom (James 3:13). Peter challenges you to be prepared to give the reason for your hope with gentleness & respect (1 Peter 3:15–16).

Gentle believers care for and nurture others. They stay calm and don't push people's buttons. They build others up. They offer a listening ear when people need to talk.

How will you channel the gentleness of Jesus to others today?

Read Hebrews 11.

216 Self-Control--Regular or High-Test?

I was tested for self-control recently. I was negative! Seriously, you might consider lack of self-control your greatest character weakness. In the United States, 40 million are addicted to tobacco. Eighteen million to alcohol. 4.2 million to marijuana. 1.8 million to painkillers. 821,000 to cocaine. 426,000 to heroin.¹ Other addictions abound—hobbies, food, and gambling. Your word control is a huge self-control challenge, isn't it? Angry outbursts, gossip, toxic criticism, and foolish talk easily spout from uncontrolled mouths. "Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight

rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless" (James 1:26, NIV). Regular self-control often fails.

Regular self-control doesn't depend on God. It puts the sinful nature in charge of limiting sin. That's like putting a squirrel in charge of your birdfeeder. Regular self-control is a limited resource. Some start with a small cup of patience for the day. Others with about four drops! The more you need to be patient, the less patience you have left. When it's gone, so is your self-control!

God has a superior self-control strategy. It seems ironic. Allowing the Holy Spirit to control you produces high-test self-control (Galatians 5:22–23). High-test self-control can't co-exist with letting passion, pleasure, or pride control you. High-test self-control, like love, is a gift from God. Like the gift of athletic ability, you must expend effort to fully develop it. Paul disciplined his body and kept it under control (1 Corinthians 9:27). You give your all, but high-test self-control is more than self-effort.

Self-control implies an internal battle. An all-dessert diet sounds attractive. But you must deny or control your desires for your own well-being. High-test self-control is more about saying yes to God's control than saying no to the particular temptation you face. You experience and exercise high-test self-control by faith. It's trusting Christ to do in and through you what you could never do by willpower alone.

What's supernatural about high-test self-control? What is your part?

Read Hebrews 12.

Chapter 23

HIS POWER FOR YOUR WEAKNESS

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

2 CORINTHIANS 12:9 NIV

217 Power Up

"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" (2 Corinthians 12:9, NIV).

Power makes you more productive. You can clear leaves from your garage floor with a leaf blower in ten seconds. It takes a minute with a broom. You need God's power to replace your weakness. Without His strength, you might complete a "Do" list, but not His.

How can you avoid power failure? God's power is constantly available. That's never a problem. No life-storm can knock it out. Faith plugs you into it. Trust God to do through you what you can't do on your own. That includes loving those who've hurt you and much more. Abiding in Christ (John 15:5) is staying plugged into Him and His power.

To make an eternal difference, you must stay connected to Christ and His power. Read Hebrews 13.

218 January Dandelions

"Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction" (2 Timothy 4:2, NIV).

I've observed dandelions blooming somewhere in our yard in Pennsylvania every month of the year. April is the peak month. But a few adventurous plants parade their yellow blossoms unexpectedly at the oddest times, even in January. They pay no mind to the

thermometer or the calendar. They're prepared to reproduce in season and out of season.

I've been involved in witnessing nights and evangelistic services. God's word flew like dandelion seeds parachuting on spring breezes. Evangelism isn't my spiritual gift. Sometimes, I felt great relief at the completion of these witnessing ventures. It was the end of witnessing night. Or the evangelistic services were over for another year. I easily forget that witness is something I am, rather than something I do. You're born again to declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9)—as a way of life. Be a January dandelion!

How can you be a better witness as a way of life? Read James 1.

219 Saving the Best for Last

God is pruning and tending you so your last years can be your best! A semi-dwarf Bartlett pear tree in my father's orchard lived thirty-seven years. I harvested its pears from 2013–2015. My centenarian dad no longer could. I picked them green at the end of August. In about 10 days they ripened into sugary sweet, juicy, yellow delicacies. The tree's thirty-fifth year was its best! It yielded more than two hundred pears. A year later it was in obvious decline. The following year, the whole top of the tree broke off.

Increasing age can make you content to sit on the laurels of your previous service. Don't start sliding halfway between third base and home plate! Your last year of life might not be your best. But the years preceding that can bring unprecedented blessings to others!

“The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the LORD, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green” (Psalm 92:12–14, NIV).

You're never too old to love God and others. Even with diminished energy and mobility, you can still show kindness and caring. You can still send cards, make phone calls, and send encouraging electronic messages to others. My goal for my last years is to be a blessing to as many people as possible. What's yours?

How can you use your resources and experience to bless others now and beyond the grave? Read James 2.

220 Strength for Your Weakness

You have weaknesses. Your “go-to” strength source is revealing. Lance Armstrong blew the spokes off other racers’ bikes as no one ever had. He won seven straight Tour de France titles. His wristband said Livestrong. His 2012 confessions revealed he’d secretly lived dope strong. He cheated to keep winning.

The information available online can strengthen your weak areas. I learned how to change my car’s cabin filter on YouTube. Nevertheless, you can’t Google and YouTube your way to a purposeful, meaningful, strong life. Your basic problem is you’re profoundly love-challenged. Apart from God’s strength, you’ll stay that way.

The LORD is my strength is an oft-repeated theme in the Bible (Exodus 15:2; Psalm 18:1, 22:19, 28:7, 118:14; Isaiah 12:2, 49:5; Jeremiah 16:19; Habakkuk 3:19). God’s mighty power provides physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, relational, and ministry strength. “But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint” [physical] (Isaiah 40:31, NIV). “My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word” [emotional] (Psalm 119:28, NIV). “I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes” [Intellectual] (Psalm 119:99, NIV). “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power” [spiritual] (Ephesians 6:10, NIV). “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” [relational] (Galatians 5:22–23, NIV). “If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides” [ministry] (1 Peter 4:11, NIV). Don’t make the Lord’s strength your last option. Make it your “go-to” source!

How have you experienced the LORD’s strength recently? Read James 3.

221 The Hardest Thing You Can Do

You sometimes invent your own version of the truth to avoid the pain of living the truth. You believe lies to avoid guilt. “God is leading me to divorce my husband because He wants me to be

happy.” By contrast, the ultimate truth of Georgia Congressman John Lewis’s life was the full equality of all people. He suffered to achieve it. He summoned his country to be what it said it was but wasn’t—a land where all people are created equal. He was arrested forty-five times. His skull was fractured. He was often beaten and tear-gassed.¹ He believed in the full equality of people. He lived it out.

Bruce Wilkinson tells of a Christian man who confessed that he lied to everyone all the time. He was afraid he couldn’t stop. He listed twenty-six people to whom he’d lied. The first was his boss. He often lied on his timesheet. He was paid for the hours he didn’t work. Furthermore, his boss had told him to lie to the customers. The man confessed his lies to his boss. He told him he wasn’t going to lie to him or for him anymore. Their two-hour conversation convicted his boss of his own lying. The boss said he’d never ask the man to lie for him again. Usually, however, living the truth brings negative consequences. It’s contrary to the world’s operating system. It receives the world’s hate (John 15:19). Living the truth daily is the hardest, most costly thing you can do. You need God’s grace to do it.

You live the truth when you keep your promises. “God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?” (Numbers 23:19, NIV). The expected answer is, “No!” God is your model. You live the truth when you keep your word. That includes preparing income tax returns, honoring marriage vows, or keeping verbal or written contracts. Psalm 15:4 says that the one who shall abide in God’s tabernacle and dwell in His holy hill keeps his oath even when it hurts.

Jesus is full of grace and truth (John 1:14). He fills you with both (John 1:17) as you follow Him. You must stick to Him like a magnet to a refrigerator. Trust His grace for the hardest thing you can do—living the truth daily.

What makes living the truth so challenging? Read James 4.

222 Slay the Inferiority Dragon

Nearly everyone battles feelings of inferiority. Surprisingly, the Bible consistently affirms your value to God. He created you in His image. He crowned you with glory and honor (Psalm 8:5). He made

you an overseer of His creation (Genesis 1:28). He sent His Son to deliver you from sin's penalty (Romans 5:8). The ultimate measure of your worth is that God paid Jesus to get you. You're worth Jesus to God! Humility isn't condemning yourself. Loving yourself isn't sinful.

How can you slay the inferiority dragon? Don't think God is against rather than for you. That's contrary to Romans 8:32. God's giving His Son guarantees He will give you everything else you need to serve Him. God is for you (Romans 8:31). Why are you against and down on yourself? You don't know anything about yourself that He doesn't!

Violating God's standards of right and wrong brings guilt and shame. It feeds inferiority's fires. God's plan to slay this dragon is to confess your sins and trust in His cleansing (1 John 1:9).

Do you feel unsuccessful? You're not beautiful, famous, rich, or an important member of society. As a Christian, you don't march to that drumbeat. You're not on earth to make a name for yourself. Instead, you must deny yourself (Luke 9:23) and let your light shine so that others might glorify God (Matthew 5:16).

Your parents may have focused far more on what you did wrong than right. They rarely praised or encouraged you. They compared you unfavorably to your siblings. They made you earn their affection. God isn't like that.

No mule has won the Kentucky Derby! Are your expectations realistic? Mom said you can do anything you set your mind to do. That doesn't mean you can. Most athletes I coach don't have the natural abilities to excel in track and field throwing events. It doesn't matter how hard they work at them. That's okay. No one is a ten everywhere in life. Identify and develop your gifts. Keep on developing your strengths, even though you frequently fail. Finally, help others discover their gifts. Encourage them and seek to make them a success. That melts away your own feelings of inferiority.

Have feelings of inferiority hindered your spiritual fruit? How will you change that? Read James 5.

223 I'll Be Happy When

I've done my share of "I'll be happy when..." thinking. "I'll be happy when school gets out in June." I was but I had to wade

through the muck of 180 unhappy days of school to get there. “I’ll be happy when I graduate from high school.” I was but I had to run the marathon of 2,160 school days to climb the happiness podium briefly. “I’ll be happy when I’m done with studying and can get a job.” I was but work life presented its own problems. You get the picture. Circumstantial happiness lasts only slightly longer than it takes to say it. Are you still living the “I’ll be happy when...” philosophy?

Do you feel like the happiness train always departs a minute before you arrive? Does joy flutter like an elusive butterfly just out of reach? Is bliss conditional on something happening that hasn’t happened yet? Do your circumstances really have to change for you to be happy? Do you just need to change how you think? I’ve concluded there will always be cobwebs in the corners, marks on the walls, and dust on the carpets of my life. “I’ll be happy when...” doesn’t enhance today’s joy. I’m learning to focus on what I have rather than on what I don’t have yet.

I’m discovering that gratitude is the gateway to today’s happiness. At bedtime, I daily reflect on the blessings of the day. I thank God for them. They typically include food, water, housing, clothing, relationships, and reflections on how my life touched someone’s life that day. I’ve concluded I’ll be happy when... I give thanks in everything (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Try it!

For the next week, daily thank God for at least six blessings and see what happens. Read 1 Peter 1.

224 Is Depression a Sin?

Depression is the leukemia of the human spirit. It happens when days overflowing with doubts, despair, and discouragement run in packs. The depressed are constantly sad, inefficient, and unenthusiastic. They’re without hope and down on themselves. They’re increasingly dependent on others. They withdraw socially. They often practice addictive behaviors to numb their pain. Some are depressed without realizing it. They’re characterized by hypochondria or various impulsive behaviors. The most desperate opt for suicide. Women are twice as likely to experience depression as men.

Depression can result from genetics or wacky brain chemistry. Medications, medical issues, and avalanches of stressful events can cause it. Not taking care of ourselves physically can underlie it. Bipolar disorder is genetically linked. Depression seems to run in families. Reduced dopamine levels in the brain can cause it. Around two hundred prescription drugs have depression as a side effect.¹ Physical problems associated with depression include too little thyroid hormone, heart disease, and MS. Add to the list Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and Huntington's disease. Further, add a stroke, lack of vitamin B12, and problems with the parathyroid or adrenal glands. Lupus, mono, hepatitis, HIV, and cancer can also set it off. Seasonal Affective Disorder is depression linked to annual periods of shorter hours of daylight. When perceived threats are long-lived, like the COVID-19 pandemic, changes in the body and brain can be long-lasting. Studies have shown early losses during childhood can affect chemical balances in the body for the rest of life. They make children more prone to depression. Insufficient sleep, a lack of exercise, and eating too many unhealthy foods can also contribute to paralyzing emotional pain.

Depression envelops you when you can no longer believe God is good to you. In Scripture, you see its disabling, painful grip on Job, Moses, David, Elijah, Jeremiah, Paul, and Jesus in Gethsemane. David wrote, "Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?" (Psalm 43:5, NIV). Trusting God is best. But He understands your weakness: "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" (Psalm 103:13–14, NIV).

Christians wrongly assume they should never be depressed. Depressed believers are no more unspiritual than believers with diabetes or high blood pressure. Instead of shooting the emotionally wounded, follow Paul's teaching, "And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone" (1 Thessalonians 5:14, NIV).

What's the next step for you to move from depression toward joy or to help a depressed person do so? Read 1 Peter 2.

225 Enduring Hope

You could benefit from a daily injection of a gardener's enduring hope! A gardener holds a yellow wax bean seed in her hand. She is utterly convinced that after it's planted it will germinate. It will eventually produce yellow wax beans. She knows very well all sorts of forces oppose the fulfillment of her dream. Fungal and insect attacks. Drought or raiding rodents or deer. All could utterly crush her confident expectation. Nevertheless, she plants the seed in hope!

Hope is fading in the USA. Average life expectancy has dropped for three consecutive years because of suicide, drug, and alcohol-related deaths.¹ COVID-19 dropped it still further. It's not far-fetched to attribute some of the declines to hopelessness. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among those 10–34 years old. It's surrender to hopelessness.² People choose and then overdo the anesthesia of alcohol and drugs. They do it to escape the tyranny of hopelessness. Over 70,000 died from drug overdoses in 2017.³ There's a better way!

So, how can hopelessness become enduring hope? Trust in Christ and His promises is the bridge to hope. God is the only foundation on which hope can securely rest. That's my experience. It's also the experience of millions of others. Those who don't trust in Christ have no hope (Ephesians 2:12). But those who do will renew their strength, soar like eagles and move about with boundless energy (Isaiah 40:31, NIV)—energized by hope. Through God's word, they find hope (Romans 15:4). Through the power of His Spirit, they overflow with it continuously (Romans 15:13)!

How has Christ been for you the bridge between hopelessness and hope?

Read 1 Peter 3.

226 Hope without an Expiration Date

I'm sure you've noticed that unexpected circumstances play with earthly hopes like a cat with a mouse. Sometimes, the mouse escapes unharmed. Often, it doesn't. The year 2020 was like a wrecking ball to a building. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted lives and shattered hopes. I'd hoped the economy would continue to smile upon my pension fund. That didn't work out well initially. But then it bounced

back and was better at the end of the year than before the pandemic struck. The new normal for 2020 was a freedom-restraining regulatory fog. There was limited visibility ahead. You didn't know how long the fog would last. Earthly hopes have unanticipated expiration dates. All of them will someday crash into the immovable object of death.

Have you discovered a hope without an expiration date? It crosses the immovable barrier of death effortlessly. Financial woes, unexpected unemployment, and shelter-in-place orders can't destroy it. It's a living hope. It's anchored in the living, resurrected Jesus Christ. It floods your soul when you're born again. It's not a dreaming variety of hope. Anchored in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it's a confident expectation. It's being fully persuaded God will fulfill all His promises.

Your hope includes an eternal inheritance. It has no expiration date. It's kept in heaven for you. Skeptics' arguments bounce off it like bullets off superman. That's because it's a God-given, living hope. "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. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you" (1 Peter 1:3–4, NIV). 1 Corinthians 13:13 tells you how to live in the dark valleys of life— ... "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" ... (1 Corinthians 13:13, NIV).

Where is unswerving hope grounded? How will you extravagantly demonstrate it today? Read 1 Peter 4.

227 Escaping Quicksand Sadness

Quicksand is dangerous! You need God's help to stop replaying your mental tapes of offenses and failures. The release comes from forgiving others and yourself. Allowing anger or guilt to find a home in your heart, will, like decaying fish, quickly stink up the whole place.

You must challenge negative thinking. Just because you're not perfect doesn't mean you're a failure. It doesn't prove you can't do anything right. Yes, you feel stupid when you mess up. But that doesn't mean you're stupid. You can have influence. You don't have

to be perfect for others to love you. Don't dwell on your offenses and failures. Think about what's good, positive, and just (Philippians 4:8).

You can always accomplish more with a positive (I can do this) than a negative attitude. You must do the uncomfortable things you least want to do. Even if you're afraid and unmotivated. That's often the key that opens your self-constructed jail cell. Others' support and input can identify and correct your self-defeating thinking. That's how God's church is supposed to work (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

When you're in the quicksand, life's joy bells lose their clapper. Nevertheless, choosing to do one or two things daily that used to give you joy will eventually do so again. If the quicksand is especially deep and unyielding, medication may be necessary.

When you're sad and unmotivated, it's easy to neglect yourself physically. Resist that urge. Pursue a healthy diet and eight hours of sleep. Get 15 or more minutes of sunshine and 10–30 minutes of physical exercise daily. Regular exercise, especially, increases your energy level significantly.

Discouragement is your knee-jerk reaction to prolonged days on Mount Adversity. But you need to see the bigger picture. James wrote that trials and temptations test your faith. They teach patience (James 1:2–4). God is at work. You're under construction.

Beware of lashing out at others when you're in the quicksand. You'll do yourself a big favor if you choose to be kind despite difficulties. Studies demonstrate that expressing gratitude, love, and generosity to others boosts you out of depression's pit.

Trusting God lifts your mind from the pit to the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). Knowing God's strength and supply in all circumstances, Paul learned to be joyful. Whether he had much or little (Philippians 4:11, 12, 13, 19). You can pray in the pit with palms down to symbolize releasing your burdens. Then, palms up, symbolize receiving God's enabling grace. Try it!

For the next 30 days refuse to play the mental tapes of your and others' offenses and failures. Watch how they lose their power over you. Pray for God to bless those who've offended you. Read 1 Peter 5.

228 Confidence

Positive thinking isn't all-powerful. But it carries immeasurably more horsepower than negative thinking. "I can" energizes you. "I can't" drains your battery.

I can't do jigsaw puzzles well. I don't try. I joke that given a 1000-piece puzzle with 999 pieces already in place, I'd finish it in five to ten minutes! With an attitude adjustment, I could learn to assemble jigsaw puzzles. I don't yet want to badly enough to snip the 't from can't. Scissors wouldn't help.

It's not that easy. Persistence and confidence intertwine in solving problems and accomplishing goals. Like a tough black walnut, problems eventually crack under unrelenting pressure. That approach has worked hundreds of times for me. It produces breakthroughs in everything from solving math problems to fixing something broken. Persistence is good. Someone you trust to help you double-team every problem is better.

Those you trust and who believe in you and your ability inject confidence. Their "You can do it!" makes an enormous difference. It's even better if they say, "I'll be with you!" The best of all is, "I'll be with you and will help you do it!" Eighteen times God says in Scripture that He's with you. "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" (Isaiah 41:10, NIV). God's promised presence is the ultimate launching pad for confidence. "I can do all this through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13, NIV). Snip, snip, snip! There goes the 't!

How does God's presence help change your perspective on difficult things you need to do? Read 2 Peter 1.

Chapter 24

HIS RESOURCES FOR YOUR SERVICE

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others.

1 PETER 4:10 NIV

229 Stealing from God

I'm a thief. I admit it. I've taken what doesn't belong to me. I've used it for my own selfish purposes. Don't panic! Don't double-check your home security system. You need not feel for your wallet to protect yourself against me. A venomous snake is more likely to bite you and lightning strike you simultaneously than I am to take anything that belongs to you. But taking what belongs to God—that's another story. How so?

“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” (1 Corinthians 6:19–20, NIV). I've stolen God-given time, abilities, money, and energy. I've used them in ways God never intended. I'm fairly sure you have too. You naturally have an almost irresistible urge. It's taking what belongs to God, your body, and using it for your own purposes.

There's another more subtle more serious stealing from God. I'm not proud to share it. I've stolen God's glory also. I've taken credit for God's work through me—good sermon, preacher! I've not always given credit where it's due. I've repeated the sin of Moses and Aaron. They produced water for the Israelites out of a rock in the wilderness. Then they took personal credit for God's miracle (Numbers 20:10). Stealing God's glory isn't a small infraction. "I'm the LORD; that is my name! I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols" (Isaiah 42:8, NIV). I'm trying to change my thieving ways. How about you?

How will you honor God with your body today? Read 2 Peter 2.

230 Biblical Stewardship's Foundation

Antiques Roadshow features people who often purchase for less than ten dollars objects worth thousands of dollars. Paul describes the best of all deals in 2 Corinthians 5:14–21. Jesus sacrificed His life to delete your sins and add His righteousness to your account. You need both transactions. The value of His sacrifice is beyond calculation (1 Peter 1:18–19, NIV). God's deal is the best you'll ever get. A trillion dollars for your used toilet paper would pale in comparison.

Always remember that you don't deserve this greatest of all deals. Gratitude is the foundation of biblical whole-life stewardship. It's the only gushing spring from which wholehearted, whole-life stewardship can flow indefinitely.

Jesus asks for something in return for rescuing you from death, judgment, and flames. He has given you the ministry of reconciliation. Turning God's enemies into His friends is what you do. Faithful whole-life stewardship is how you do it.

You were once God's enemy. Sin was a Mount Everest barrier between God and you. You were guilty of treason. You rebelled against your Creator and the Captain of your ship. You insisted on living for yourself rather than for Him. By the cross, God reconciled you to Himself and removed that Mount Everest barrier. He unloaded the Mount Manure of your sins on Jesus on the cross. Its peak soared far above the clouds. God credits His righteousness to your account. God's undeserved favor through faith reconciled you to Him. He has recruited you to join Him to reconcile other rebels and to build them up in the faith to reconcile still others and build them up.

How should you then live? Like one God has pulled from the flames. Let gratitude to your Rescuer unendingly fill the sails of your life. Make Him your organizing center every day. Use all the resources He has given you for His glory. You're not your own. Jesus bought you with a price (1 Corinthians 6:19). As His steward, you must be faithful (1 Corinthians 4:2). That's not much to ask considering all He has done for you!

How has gratitude powered your stewardship? Read 2 Peter 3.

231 Some Assembly Required

You put together things that arrive in cardboard boxes. Then, they become usable. You also own tools that can do far more than you ask of them. I use less than five percent of Microsoft Office's potential. I periodically get updates about new functions it can perform. I don't use 95 percent of what it can already do!

Some assembly required applies to spiritual gifts. Your effort and attitude affect whether God's gift in you will be fully functional. If you don't develop it or are afraid to use it, it'll gather dust in a forgotten corner of your life. You won't make the difference you could've. The Apostle Paul didn't want that to happen to his disciple Timothy. He wrote, "Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you" (1 Timothy 4:14, NIV). Again, he wrote, "For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1:6-7, NIV). It's possible to neglect to develop and use your gift(s).

Timothy knew God's gift to him. You might not know yours. He had to overcome his natural fear. He had to fan the glowing coals of the gift into full flame. You might have to discover your gift before you can develop and boldly use it. If you're following Jesus, you've at least one spiritual gift. "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms" (1 Peter 4:10, NIV). It takes time and effort to discover and develop it. Whatever your gift, you must depend on God's power, love, and self-discipline so it bears its intended fruit.

Why is it easier to neglect our spiritual gifts than to develop them?

Read 1 John 1.

232 Your World-Changing Skills

Your skills determine your usefulness. In February 2006 I was part of a ministry team from the Swatara Church of God. We went to Mississippi to work on houses Hurricane Katrina had damaged. I contributed but would've been more valuable with my brother Sam's

construction skills. I wanted to help. But good intentions are a poor substitute for practical abilities.

Solomon was preparing to build the temple. He knew the Sidonians could cut down trees far better than the Israelites. He asked Hiram, king of Tyre, for help. "So give orders that cedars of Lebanon be cut for me. My men will work with yours, and I will pay you for your men whatever wages you set. You know that we have no one so skilled in felling timber as the Sidonians" (1 Kings 5:6, NIV). To oversee the construction of the tabernacle God chose Bezalel. He filled him with His Spirit, wisdom, competence, and multiple skills. He also appointed Oholiab to help him. He enabled skilled workers to construct the tabernacle as He intended (Exodus 31:2–6).

God gives you a passion to develop your skills. He uses them to serve others through you. In the beginning, you often don't know how He'll use your abilities. You never know the full extent of your influence on this side of eternity. About 1985 I wanted to learn how to type. That's how I justified purchasing a computer. God had something bigger in mind—an eventual writing ministry. Now I provide free Christian resources to believers in developed and developing countries through the internet.

What skills do you have that God can use to build His Kingdom? What additional skills can you develop? Read 1 John 2.

233 How to Give Diamonds

At Christmas time you don't give everyone diamonds as gifts. You can't afford it. You give presents of lesser value. Or do you?

The best gift is 24/7, self-sacrificing love that shimmers, twinkles, and sparkles as it blesses others in a thousand ways. One form of this supernatural giving is superior. How so?

God has given you one or more gifts with which to build up the body of Christ in love. These are your chief spiritual resources. "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" (Ephesians 4:16, NIV).

You have assigned work. I can bless Christ's body, and the church, by cleaning tables or helping in the kitchen. I can teach a

class or visit the homebound. But I bless it and build it up in love best by using the spiritual gift(s) God gave me. My chief gift is writing to explain and apply spiritual truths to benefit others. What's your chief gift? If you don't know yet, I recommend taking the spiritual gifts inventory at

<https://www.theparishpaper.com/sites/default/files/resources/Church%20Effectiveness%20Nuggets-%20Volume%2024.pdf>. Then, through trial and error, identify and give your best gift(s). You can give diamonds! Don't settle for less!

What's your chief spiritual gift? Read 1 John 3.

234 Stone in Your Shoe

A pebble in your shoe makes you adjust your stride instantly. You remove the irritant as soon as possible.

God places stones in your shoe to change your stride. They're not easily removed. He wants your attention. He's not happy about how you've been walking! His stones motivate you through pain to consider changing how you live. Jonah's stone was a storm and a huge fish (Jonah 1:4, 17). The Apostle Paul's was blindness (Acts 9:8). The Apostle Peter's was a rebuke from the Apostle Paul (Galatians 2:11). Israel's stone was exile to Babylon because of their unfaithfulness to God (1 Chronicles 9:1). Nebuchadnezzar's was madness because of his pride (Daniel 4). God uses accidents, illnesses, jail sentences, and various problems to get your attention. He's turning you back to the narrow way that leads to life (Matthew 7:13–14). You've heard God's whispering in your pain and changed how you live. His stone got your attention.

God uses stones to prepare you for future assignments. The message He wants to deliver through you is ready. But you aren't ready to deliver it! At twenty-one, I wouldn't have written the same blog posts as at 70. An assortment of stones significantly shaped me. God might allow you to lose a job because He's sending you in a new direction. He lets you feel physical or emotional pain. They soften your heart so you're more compassionate toward others. God puts stones in your shoe to make you more like Jesus.

How have God's stones made you more like Jesus? Read 1 John 4.

235 Managing Your Resources (1)

Stewardship is glorifying God with your entire life. Everything you have you've received from Him (1 Corinthians 4:7). Faithful stewards manage their resources to benefit God and others. Everything you do is to bring glory to God, not yourself (1 Corinthians 10:31).

God expects your life to be overflowing with thankfulness (Colossians 2:7). God's gracious work is invisible to the self-absorbed. To the admiring worshipper, it's everywhere. Words of thanksgiving should flow from your lips as you observe God's abundant goodness. "Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song" (Psalm 95:2). Giving thanks in all circumstances glorifies Him. It shows you trust him even when you don't understand His actions or timing. (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Review each day at its conclusion and give thanks for at least five of its blessings.

You'll have to give an account of how you use the talents and spiritual gifts God has given you. You're either a minister or an equipper of ministers (Ephesians 4:11–12). You've at least one gift to use to minister to others (1 Peter 4:10). Equippers help you identify your spiritual gifts, temperament, and spiritual passion and deploy them in fruitful ministry. Search "Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 24" for a spiritual gifts inventory.

You'll have to give an account of how you use your time. "Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time" (Colossians 4:5). You use your time wisely when you overcome what isn't like Christ in you, love God with all your being, and love your neighbor as yourself. Are you taking advantage of the opportunities your church provides to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ? What daily time slot do you devote to God's word and prayer? How are you using your time to seek first God's kingdom and righteousness?

Your resources include your body, training, positions, skills, wisdom, the Holy Spirit, God's word, your family, your possessions, your influence, your knowledge, your words, your relationships, and your freedom. Make God the pie plate of your life, not just a single slice of pie. All of life, not just part of it, is to glorify Him.

How are you using your resources to bring God glory? Read 1 John 5.

236 Managing Your Resources (2)

You're a steward of your unique spiritual story. It's an effective way to share your faith with others. Think about it. Boil it down. Be able to share in about three minutes what your life was like before you met Christ, how you came to know Him, and the difference He has made.

You'll have to give an account of how you use the earth's natural resources. The earth and everything in it belongs to God (Psalm 24:1). He created it to glorify Himself (Psalm 19:1–6). He values it. Loving God includes loving what He loves. Earth stewardship is part of loving your neighbor as yourself. How can you minimize your energy footprint and pollution?

You'll have to give an account of how you promote oneness with other believers. The "one another" and "each other" of Scripture direct those relationships. They include: washing one another's feet (John 13:14); loving one another (John 13:34–35); being devoted to one another (Romans 12:10); honoring one another above yourself (Romans 12:10); living in harmony with one another (Romans 12:16); stopping passing judgment on one another (Romans 14:13); accepting one another as Christ accepted you (Romans 15:7); instructing one another (Romans 15:14); agreeing with one another (1 Corinthians 1:10); serving one another in love (Galatians 5:13); being kind and compassionate to one another (Ephesians 4:32); forgiving each other as God in Christ forgave you (Ephesians 4:32); speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19); submitting to one another (Ephesians 5:21); bearing with each other (Colossians 3:13); teaching and admonishing one another (Colossians 3:16); encouraging one another and building each other up (1 Thessalonians 5:11); spurring one another on to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24).

You'll have to give an account of how you use your material resources. Material resources can further God's kingdom now and after you die. You can do good through your will. Have you discovered the joy of generosity? People need your help. Jesus affirmed that one who gains the entire world but loses his soul loses

(Mark 8:36). Use your money wisely. It's a wonderful servant but a terrible master.

What "one another" or "each other" command most needs your attention today? Read 2 John.

237 Do You See What I See?

Vision is bigger than the view from your window. I see the potential to help people far beyond the horizon. I'm doing that by using the writing gift God has given me. It's exciting, humbling, and fulfilling. I've strengthened and encouraged people whom I'll never personally meet on earth. One blog I posted and boosted on Facebook in the Philippines and five African nations has reached more than 25 million people. More than 3.1 million people have engaged with it. More than 30,000 people have shared it with their Facebook friends. I estimate that those shares have reached more than 9 million additional people.

Do you see what I see? Do you see the potential for God to use you to help people you may never meet on earth? You can touch more people than you can imagine. You can do it by second-order and third-order influence. In Jesus' name, you can strengthen, equip, and motivate people. They in turn will help others who will help others. It can start as simply as sharing a listening ear and encouraging words with a hurting person today. "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7, NIV). God gifts you to do your part to make His worldwide church strong. May your vision go far beyond what you can do in your immediate neighborhood!

How can God use you to bless people you may never meet through second, third, and fourth-order influence? Read 3 John.

238 Far-Away Heart Trouble

I was a half-hearted service salesperson at a Pennsylvania Turnpike Gulf station. I worked there about 50 years ago. My primary responsibility was to sell tires, batteries, oil changes, and accessories. Our best salespeople either intentionally deceived customers or didn't take "no" for an answer. Neither tactic appealed

to me. I sold enough to remain employed. By contrast, consider my first day on the job as a summer helper for the Pennsylvania Fish Commission. I helped remove half-decomposed, world-class stinky snapping turtle carcasses from trap nets. Imagine the stench. Multiply it by ten! I did it wholeheartedly. I was fully devoted to becoming an aquatic biologist.

I've spent too many days as a half-hearted follower of Jesus. I don't want to live that way anymore. I want to be like David. He made his share of mistakes. But he was fully devoted to the LORD his God (1 Kings 11:4; 15:3). In the North American church, spiritual apathy is widespread. Those in the pews are people enthusiastic about something. However, most aren't enthusiastic about their relationship with God.

Blahs-ianity is passionate spirituality's chief competitor. Doing and saying "right things" without passion anger God. "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Matthew 15:8, NIV). Far-away hearts launch rote prayers. They sing during worship services unthinkingly. They minister to others to receive recognition. They use positions in the church for personal power. They have years of perfect Sunday school attendance. But they don't apply anything they hear. They possess a 1–2-hour per week Christian commitment. Given all God has done for you, He deserves better than that!

When have you been a half-hearted Christian? What steps can you take to give God what He deserves? Read Jude.

239 Guiding Little Hands

My grandson completed the math homework. He just had to sign his name and the date at the top of the page. He did both—three times faster than his grandfather would have. It showed. I could hardly read either one. To his credit, he wrote the correct year. His grandpa is likely to mess that up the first few days of every new year! On the other hand, the nine on his paper looked mangled. Like a victim of a head-on collision with an 18-wheeler. I asked him to erase his name and the date. Then I asked him to write them more clearly. He did a much better job on the second attempt. It's not about being perfect.

HIS POWER FOR YOUR WEAKNESS

I've struggled with trying to be perfect for much of my life. I've taken great pains and given them to others! Underneath is often the perceived need to be perfect, so others love me. Such motivation is self-centered. So, why should you do your best?

“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” (Colossians 3:23–24, NIV). Yes, the Lord rewards you for doing your best in everything for Him. However, the reward shouldn't be your primary motivation. Instead, it's overflowing gratitude for all He's done for you (Colossians 2:7). You guide little hands to do their best for the Master by doing your best for Him!

What little eyes are taking hints from you about what life on earth is about? Are they clearly seeing your gratitude to God? Read Revelation 1.

Chapter 25

HIS PURPOSE FOR YOUR AIMLESSNESS

"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."

JEREMIAH 29:11 NIV

240 Minding God's Business (1)

"Mind your own business!" You've heard it. You've said it. You've done it. There's nothing wrong with minding your own business, is there? Wouldn't the world be a better place if you lived and let live? Wouldn't things run more smoothly if you were tolerant of everyone's beliefs? Aren't they just as valid as your own? Wouldn't peace on earth increase if you just did your own thing and let others do the same?

Whatever else it may be, this philosophy isn't Christian. Christians who mind their own business are living, breathing contradictions. Fully devoted disciples of Jesus consistently vote for God's will, not their own. Why? Because minding your own business is far from praiseworthy. It's the essence of sin Isaiah described: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; ..." (Isaiah 53:6, NIV).

Aren't you glad Jesus didn't mind His own business? You'd be great white shark bait. You'd be helplessly tied hand and foot, inches from the snapping, gruesome jaws of eternal death if He had. He came to seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:10). He pitied and loved you enough to become shark bait in your place. Your eternal destiny depends on His obedience.

The eternal destiny of others depends on your minding God's business. "My food, said Jesus, is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work" (John 4:34, NIV)."

His work is now your work. Jesus said, "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world" (John 17:18, NIV). Jesus sends you into the world, not to live for yourself but to live for Him.

This series focuses on three specific ways to mind God's business. The lives of three men represent them. We'll consider how to encourage others like Barnabas, how to follow Jesus like Timothy, and how to disciple others like Paul.

*Would life be better or worse if all people minded their own business? Why?
Read Revelation 2.*

241 Minding God's Business (2)

Part of minding God's business is being an encourager. Barnabas was a Jew born in Cyprus. He had relatives and land in Jerusalem. He sold the land and gave the proceeds to the apostles to benefit the community of believers. He was like a spark that starts a wildfire. His sacrificial example influenced others who influenced others. That unbroken chain of influence reaches all the way to today.

Your encouragement can lubricate the machinery of the church. It can make it hum as all its parts work together smoothly. Your words can elevate others' spirits. The church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch. Gentiles were becoming believers there (Acts 11:22–24). Barnabas dumped an oxcart of encouragement on both the missionaries and converts. Its sweet fragrance has lingered for 2000 years. As a result of Barnabas' encouragement, they shared the gospel even more vigorously. The number of converts grew rapidly.

You lift others up by believing in them and in what they can accomplish for God. That helps them believe they can be effective. My belief in the athletes I've coached eventually became their belief in themselves. The principle applies equally in the spiritual realm.

Emphasize others' strengths instead of their weaknesses. Focus on what they have going for them rather than their deficiencies. Such encouragement often transforms "I can't" thinking into "I can."

Praise improvement and effort as much as goal attainment. Track and field coaches focus more on personal bests than winning. Only one person can win. But everyone can improve. Improving is achievable when winning often isn't.

Encourage and pray for your spiritual leaders. They battle frustration. They feel like they're not making a difference. Give them pedal to the metal esteem (1 Thessalonians 5:13). Send them a note sharing specific ways their ministry has blessed you. That can

motivate them more than you can imagine. The good you can do through encouragement, like the apples in a seed, you can't calculate!

Encourage one of your spiritual leaders by communicating specifically how that leader has blessed you. Read Revelation 3.

242 Minding God's Business (3)

Part of minding God's business is following Jesus. Jesus' followers obey Him. They love one another. "To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples" (John 8:31, NIV). The Jews to whom Jesus spoke believed what He said was true. But they were unwilling to yield themselves to Him. Those superficially attached to Jesus don't do what He says. That's an extremely dangerous position—Judas Iscariot's position. The first mark of being Jesus' follower is you obey His teachings.

Second, you love other believers. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35, NIV). Love is an unconditional, sacrificial commitment to an imperfect person. That brand of love sets you apart from others. It blooms in your heart through a supernatural connection to Jesus, its source.

If you're a fully devoted disciple, Jesus thinks through your mind. You possess a heart through which He loves. He speaks through your voice. Through your hands, He helps. Jesus is the needle and you the thread. He goes first, and you follow.

According to Aubrey Malphurs, many churches in the United States are unclear about the characteristics of a disciple. Few have spiritual leaders who are growing as disciples. Few are committed to making disciples. They're not sure what a disciple is. To discover what a disciple is and how closely you are following Jesus see <https://www.christiangrowthresources.com/spiritual-health-assessment>. The measure of the health of a church is what its members do with their faith in the world. Church health improves as personal spiritual growth continues.

The twelve learned how to follow Jesus by spending more than three years living with Him. Timothy learned to follow Jesus through one-on-one contact with Paul. Small groups led by a fully devoted follower of Jesus build disciples best. That's what made the

difference for me and countless others. A small group of graduate students lit my spiritual candle at Penn State University about 1974 at Blair Cook's flame. The secret of discipleship is finding a flame and getting close to it.

Who is a spiritual leader you can get close to so you can become more like Jesus? Read Revelation 4.

243 Minding God's Business (4)

Minding God's business includes discipling others. The essence of Matthew 28:18–20 and 2 Timothy 2:2 is that the church is to make disciples. Paul poured his life into faithful, trustworthy men. They passed the faith on unchanged to us and generations still to come. To Timothy, he wrote, "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Timothy 2:2, NIV).

Since 2007, the Timothy Initiative has planted more than 121,000 small churches. It has seen 2.4 million people come to faith in Christ. Many of these churches are within the most unreached people groups on earth. TTI teaches that disciples of Christ make disciples who make disciples. Churches should plant churches. Leaders should make more leaders. Their training materials equip people to make disciples without formal theological training (<https://www.ttionline.org>). Disciple-making is not just for seminary graduates. Ordinary Christians all around the world are doing it.

Disciple-making can multiply your life incredibly. You can make more of a difference than you can imagine. In 1956 a student at San Diego State shared the difference Jesus has made in his life as part of a speech class assignment. Over the four months of class, Buck saw the power of true discipleship. Through daily campus contacts with fellow students, he eventually won fourteen speech classmates to Christ, including the professor. He began scared to give the speech. But he was aware the Lord was working through his weaknesses. He wasn't a great speaker. Those who received Christ indicated that it was the combination of his class talks and the kind of life he lived each day.

By 1986, thirty years later, he'd tracked students he'd won and discipled. They'd in turn won and multiplied over one thousand

others to follow Christ. Many were on the mission field, pastors, and spiritual leaders. From fourteen to one thousand! It all started with a speech fearfully delivered.

Whom can you disciple using His Power for Your Weakness?

Read Revelation 5.

244 The Christmas Light That Shines Forever

I was standing on a wooded shoreline on a cloudy summer evening. I was fishing in Glendale Lake. I foolishly didn't return to my vehicle until well after sunset. I had no flashlight or light source. I don't remember if I caught any fish. But that experience is my mental image of pitch blackness. As I inched my way back to my vehicle, I couldn't even see the trees. I waved my fishing rod slowly back and forth ahead of me. I felt my way little by little. Once beyond the grove of trees, I could see well enough to find the car.

In the moral realm, you've lived in deep darkness. We all have. You couldn't understand spiritual truth or the world as it really is. Disobediently, foolishly, you replaced Jesus, the light of the world, with your own dark agenda. Living in darkness is a futile, meaningless existence. You were addicted to self-control while ironically in the grasp of the powers of this shadowy world. The spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms controlled you (Ephesians 6:12). But the Christmas Light that shines forever gives you a living hope (1 Peter 1:3). Isaiah wrote, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned" (Isaiah 9:2, NIV).

Jesus was born in Bethlehem to set you free from darkness' merciless rule. He shines on you living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide you into the path of peace (Luke 1:79). Believing in Him sets you free--"I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness" (John 12:46, NIV). He came to open your eyes and turn you from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that you may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Him (Acts 26:18). That's His gift to you. It's wrapped with love and stained with His blood. After you receive it, your gift to Him is to leave the fruitless deeds of darkness behind you (Ephesians 5:11,

NIV) so you can declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful, eternal light (1 Peter 2:9).

Specifically, how has Jesus brought light to your life? What will you do today to show your gratitude to Him? Read Revelation 6.

245 All-in and All-out

I told her just before the high school district competition started, “I want you to go all-out. I don’t care if the discus lands outside the boundary lines—go all-out.” Fouling had been a problem at times for her throughout the season. Fear of it often hindered her from going all-out. In baseball, the line is in fair territory. In the discus throw, landing outside or on the line is a foul. She was ranked eleventh out of fourteen discus throwers who qualified for the district championship in 2019. She went all-out on all six of her throws. She set her personal record and finished fourth.

To accomplish God’s purpose, you must be all-in and all-out for Jesus. Like a runner willing to dive across the finish line. You can’t afford to worry that you’re living outside the lines of the world’s expectations. You can’t let your goals distract you from God’s goals. Paul was all-in and all-out to present every person fully mature in Christ (Colossians 1:28). He wrote, “To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me” (Colossians 1:29, NIV). He was diving for the finish line!

Your Coach gives you all-in and all-out instructions. “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters,” (Colossians 3:23, NIV) and “Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord” (Romans 12:11, NIV). Be all-in and all-out for Jesus. If necessary, dive for the finish line!

What will you do today to elevate your spiritual passion and enhance a pedal-to-the-metal attitude? Read Revelation 7.

246 Ultimate Investing

We invest in (and take pictures of) what we value. In the United States, we spend about \$233,610 on each of our children by the age of 18.¹ We take hundreds of pictures of them (more of the first than

the rest). We develop their academic, athletic, artistic, and musical abilities. We teach them how to relate to others. We spend our time, money, and energy shaping their lives. That's part of ultimate investing—investing in that which will outlast you.

One of my brothers was a college professor. Two are dentists. Another was a guidance counselor and high school coach. I'm a retired pastor, high school coach, and writer. Among us, we've touched the lives of millions of people. We're my parents' gifts to the world. You and your children are gifts to the world too.

Parents sacrifice for their children and that's good because that's what God does. Yet, ultimate investing is bigger than sacrificing for your family. God loved you before you were part of His family. He invested in your temporal and eternal well-being. He sacrificed the life of His one and only Son (John 3:16) to make your life better now and forever. Belief in Jesus opens the door to that blessing.

You, in turn, are His gift to a love-starved world. He invites you to join His grand sacrificial mission of loving those who are, at best, semi-lovable people (just like you are!). He gave His one and only Son to bless you. He also gives and channels His love through other sons and daughters. Be an ultimate investor. Be His gift to the world!

How can you be an ultimate investor and God's gift to the world today?

Read Revelation 8

247 Rear View Purpose

In college, my goal was to win awards to make a name for myself. Here's what I learned. Personal recognition was temporarily exciting. But it wasn't very fulfilling a month later. I also dreamed of making the USA Olympic track and field team. That wasn't realistic. Like the dreams of thousands of high school football players who want to play in the NFL. The NFL Players Association calculates only one in five hundred will make it. Fewer than 1 in 8,500 high school track athletes make the USA Olympic team. Chasing my dreams didn't deliver the satisfying benefits I imagined. Becoming a follower of Jesus did. I changed my orientation from making a name for myself to serving others. Serving others is every believer's purpose. There are countless ways to do it. How can you serve others best?

Identifying my specific purpose has been challenging. I'm guessing you could say the same. Have you discovered it yet? God won't define it as clearly as He did Paul's purpose. "But the LORD said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel" (Acts 9:15, NIV). So, how do you find your purpose?

You discover it by looking back at past service and asking yourself five questions.

What service has given you the most joy? In what service have others most often affirmed your contribution? What service has produced the best results? What service has been most fulfilling? In what service have you been most comfortable? The answers to those questions point toward your purpose.

Read Revelation 9

248 Discover Your Purpose

Most human beings live and die without discovering their purpose. That's because they don't have a personal relationship with the God who assigns purpose. Discovering your purpose requires a devoted commitment to fulfilling God's purposes.

Jesus came to earth to serve (Mark 10:45). He did good things for others. He said, "I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?" (John 10:32, NIV). Likewise, your purpose is to do good things for others. Doing "any good work" is having a special purpose. "In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for special purposes and some for common use. Those who cleanse themselves from the latter will be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work" (2 Timothy 2:20–21, NIV).

John Wesley said, "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can."¹ That's your general purpose! That's a practical way to love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:39).

Like Jesus, your purpose is to love and serve God and others. God prepares the way for you to do that. "For it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose"

(Philippians 2:13, NIV). So, how do you discover the fine-tuned version of that good purpose for you? God has equipped you to serve Him and others in a unique way. Discovering it is a process. Let me suggest eleven practical questions to ask yourself to help you find your unique purpose.

- Passion – What do I want to do for God? What are my spiritual urges?
- Umbrella—How does my purpose fulfill God’s purposes?
- Resources—How can I best use my time, talents, finances, and energy to serve God and others?
- Personality—Why did God give me the personality I have? How can I use the characteristics and qualities He gave me most effectively?
- Opportunities—What divine opportunities is God giving me to serve others today? How can I maximize them?
- Skills—What can I do well? How can I use my skills to best serve God and others?
- Education—How can God use my education to serve Him and others?

What is your unique purpose? Read Revelation 10.

249 Share Your Story

Torture, for a golfer, would be scoring a hole-in-one without being able to tell anyone! You naturally share the good news with others. That’s not necessarily true in your spiritual life. You soon learn not everyone shares your excitement. When you share the birth of a child, people might become envious or jealous. But rarely will they feel threatened or become angry. That’s not true when you share the good news of what Jesus did for you. Some will rejoice with you. But most won’t. It’s because most people recognize that the message challenges their self-centered way of living. Yet, tell it you must if you really love those who need to hear how they can be set free too.

Part of your purpose is to share your own spiritual story. I suggest trying to do that in no more than three minutes. Let me illustrate with my story.

“I didn’t value spiritual things very much during my first 19 years. My body often sat on a church pew. But my mind was usually

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thinking about sports. I rarely thought about God or prayed voluntarily. I never read the Bible on my own. My purpose was to win the love and acceptance of others by excelling in sports and my studies. Achieving goals that I'd set brought only fleeting happiness. The thought of dying scared me. A cloud of guilt hung over me. I believed in heaven. But I had no assurance I'd go there when I died.

In my church, I often heard that Jesus had died on the cross to pay the penalty for my moral and spiritual failures. I didn't understand how that solved the problem. I pictured it as a down payment on my passage to heaven. I thought I had to make regular payments through the good things I did. That didn't fill me with confidence.

In college as a result of hearing 1 John 5:11–12 quoted, I understood I didn't have to make any payments at all. Jesus had paid the penalty for my spiritual imperfections in full. That evening in my dorm room, I trusted in Jesus' sacrifice alone to give me the right standing with God. I invited Him into my life. That evening was a turning point. Because God loved and accepted me as I was, I wanted to do what pleased Him. Love and gratitude gradually displaced fear as dominant motivators in my spiritual life.

When Jesus came into my life, He wouldn't allow me to relate to God or others in the same old ways. For the first time, I felt a twinge of conscience after talking in a negative way about people who weren't present. He convicted me that my language needed attention. My words (& % @ #!) were a symptom of the anger and desire for control that swirled within me. God's love for and acceptance of me freed me to love and accept others. I developed a desire to serve others that I didn't previously have. My goal became to know Jesus better and to help others know Him too. Working toward that goal has brought far more fulfillment than I'd known when I pursued and achieved my own goals."

Boldly and humbly sharing your story can be a turning point in others' lives!

Think about and draft your own personal story by thinking about what your life was like before you came to know Jesus, how you came to know Him, and the difference He has made in your life. Read Revelation 11.

250 The Validity of Testimony

You can't prove Christianity's truth using the scientific method. That's like trying to eat tomato soup with a fork. The scientific method can't prove John Wilkes Booth assassinated Abraham Lincoln on April 14, 1865, while Lincoln attended a play at Ford's Theatre. That's because historical events aren't repeatable. That doesn't mean it didn't occur. You establish historical facts by weighing the testimonies of dependable witnesses. You use the methods of legal procedure. Let's assume ten people testify that they saw Sam Citizen shoot and kill Wesley Wallpaper. That puts Sam's murderous behavior beyond a reasonable doubt. Similarly, the changed lives of hundreds of millions of dependable witnesses confirm how God has transformed people through history.

A critic who is against all religious practices responded negatively to one of my blog posts. I sent back my testimony of how God has changed my life and given me a purpose. It takes about three minutes to read it. The critic's response: "Thanks for the typical loooooong winded and meaningless anecdotal story that proves absolutely nothing. A shame you couldn't just provide actual evidence for your claims." That's precisely what I did! I shared how God (whom that individual denies even exists) changed my life.

Consider the weight of the evidence of hundreds of millions of believers in Jesus whose lives He's reconstructed. They point to the same objective reality as the reason—the resurrected Jesus Christ. He's the basis of their subjective life changes. It's wise to pay attention when so many witnesses agree. One's testimony isn't a "meaningless anecdotal story that proves absolutely nothing." Acts 22 records the Apostle Paul's testimony.

To help you write your own personal testimony, click:

<https://www.christiangrowthresources.com/31-steps-toward-spiritual-maturity> and go to p. 94. Read Revelation 12.

Chapter 26

HIS ENABLING FOR YOUR PURPOSE

“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,”

EPHESIANS 3:20 NIV

251 Who’s in Charge Here?

A man was bragging about becoming one of the vice presidents of his company. His friend said he wouldn’t be surprised if there was a vice president of beans at the supermarket. The bragger thought that was crazy. He called the local store. He asked to speak to the vice president of beans. The response was, “Canned, dried, or frozen?” That didn’t happen. But if it did, it would’ve happened just that way!

Peyton Manning was the quarterback of the Denver Broncos. He was in charge of the huddle. Every group needs a leader. Whether it’s a family, sports team, church, community, state, or nation. I’ve attended meetings where the leader asked everyone to address an issue by the next meeting. The next meeting invariably revealed few if any did. Everyone’s business is no one’s business. The leader must assign someone the responsibility to develop strategies by the next meeting.

Most organizations need many leaders who are committed to their missions. Each is responsible to accomplish a specific aspect of it. For example, in churches, someone must oversee each key area of congregational life: small groups, leadership, relationships, spirituality, worship services, evangelism, ministry, and organizational structure.

King David appointed twelve persons to oversee twelve army divisions (1 Chronicles 27:2–15). Each of Israel’s tribes had a leader (16–22). King David selected twelve overseers to manage his property. That included the royal storehouses and storehouses in the outlying districts. They oversaw the workers who farmed the land, vineyards, and produce from the vineyards. Add to that oversight of his olive and sycamore fig trees and olive oil. It included his herds

grazing in Sharon, herds in the valleys, camels, donkeys, and flocks (25–31). To complete a task, someone must oversee it with a deadline to complete it.

If you were in charge of a meeting of six people and had to accomplish two major tasks by the next meeting, what would be your strategy?

Read Revelation 13.

252 Red and Yellow Child Discipline Principle

I had a conversation about school bus discipline with a friend. She drove a bus for thirty-five years. Even her middle school students were well-behaved. She also led a class at the school for students school officials had banned from riding the school bus for unruly behavior. She had a bottom-line discipline principle. First comes a warning. Thereafter, running the “red light” of expected behavior always produces unpleasant consequences.

First, she clearly explained behavioral rules and expectations. She didn’t argue with or yell at students for breaking those rules. She acted. Those who were breaking the rules in her class received a yellow card. She placed it on their desk without a word. Continued disobedience yielded a red card. She called their parents immediately to pick them up. The bus-riding ban continued. In her bus, persistently misbehaving elementary students received tokens. The students lost privileges at school. For example, they couldn’t go outside for recess. Students rarely received tokens more than once.

An amber light warns traffic must soon stop. A red light signals all cars must halt. In Pennsylvania, the penalty for not stopping is a fine and three demerit points. The police don’t argue with or yell at offenders. They deliver the consequences for breaking the law. Without consequences for misbehavior, society would be completely chaotic. “When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, people's hearts are filled with schemes to do wrong” (Ecclesiastes 8:11, NIV). Without consequences for misbehavior, homes become chaotic. Running the “red light” of expected behavior must always result in unpleasant consequences tailored to each misbehaving child.

What consequences did you experience when you misbehaved as a child? How much of a deterrent were those consequences? Read Revelation 14.

253 Big Little Decisions

About 40 years ago I decided to eat Cheerios for breakfast rather than sugary cereal. That choice has eliminated about a ton and a half of sugar and 800,000 calories from my diet.

In December 1981 I decided to write brief devotional reflections after my daily Bible reading. That has helped me get more from my Bible reading. I decided to have a mole checked on my left cheek in 2015. That might have saved me from premature melanoma-caused death.

After her husband died unexpectedly, Ruth decided to accompany her mother-in-law, Naomi. She went with her back to Bethlehem rather than stay in Moab, her homeland. There, one day, she took Naomi's advice. She alerted Boaz that he could be her kinsman-redeemer. She married him. She became a great-grandmother of King David (Ruth 3–4). She became an ancestor of Jesus Christ.

Little decisions can make a big difference. It's wise to seek God, truth, and advice before making them. Ask God for wisdom. Trust Him to direct you (James 1:5; Proverbs 3:5–6). Get the facts before deciding. They support the choices of the wise (Proverbs 13:16). Ask knowledgeable people for advice (Proverbs 24:6). Little decisions can make an enormous difference!

*What little decision has made an enormous difference in your life?
Read Revelation 15.*

254 The CARE Principle

In third grade, I received a polio vaccine shot at school. I returned to my classroom. Clarence Bowman, another student, was the only person there. I fainted. Clarence went for help. I still remember his name! Going through a crisis or painful experience with someone develops strong relational ties. Especially if that person helps you through the crisis or pain. That's the "CARE Principle." The C stands for a crisis. The A for assistance. The R for relationship. The E for enhancement. Crisis assistance enhances your relationships and builds trust. The CARE Principle fortifies friendships. It's also the most effective way worldwide to build

relationships with those who don't yet know Jesus. Crisis intervention usually includes relieving pain. You do it because you care. Some you assist will begin to follow Jesus.

CARE summarizes Jesus' approach to ministry. He healed the sick. He raised the dead. He cast demons out of people. He fed the hungry. He calmed the sea. He made water into wine. He intervened in crisis after crisis. He came to earth to address the greatest crisis of all—human sinfulness and its terrible eternal consequences. He came to give His life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28). He's your ministry model. CARE requires self-sacrificial giving to benefit others.

Churches need ministries that develop deep, caring relationships with others. They help them find healing in their hurting places. Such outreach efforts pay great dividends. They influence people to consider following Jesus wholeheartedly. First, you intervene in others' pain and suffering. Then you often have a chance to tell them that Jesus is the ultimate source of help. You let them know how they can know Him too (Matthew 5:16).

How can you and your church's ministry benefit by applying the CARE Principle? Read Revelation 16.

255 Taller at 70 than at 20

In February 2016 I had 24/7 back pain. My spine had been curved significantly to the side for years. I had a herniated disk. I purchased a back-stretching machine to separate my vertebrae. I initially used it twice daily for three minutes each time. During an early session, I felt unexpected movement in my back. My crooked spine partially straightened. I was instantly taller! At 20 I was six feet three-quarters of an inch. Now (with shoes) I'm six feet two inches.

The physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual dimensions of your life all need stretching. Stretching is hard. I exercise daily even though I'd rather not. Satisfaction with life as it is, fear, and the desire for security all resist stretching. They imprison you in the status quo. The easy path is to become increasingly shorter, fatter, and unmotivated, slowly fading into the sunset of irrelevance.

Stretch to be an increaser. Jesus was. "... Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52, KJV). Jesus can help you be an increaser too. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. 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" (Hebrews 4:15–16, NIV). With age, you might get shorter and fatter on the outside. But stretching makes you an improved person on the inside!

When you can choose between the status quo and stretching yourself today, which will you choose? Why? Read Revelation 17.

255 The Parable of the Celery Farmer

Once upon a time, there was a celery farmer who was going on a long journey. He didn't know when he'd return. He put a hired hand over his celery farm.

"When I return, you will have to give an accounting of how you managed my farm," he said. "I want you to produce the best celery you can. My reputation depends on it. I once harvested 40,000 pounds of celery per acre. Try to break my record. Do you understand what I'm asking you to do?"

"Yes, I understand," said the hired man. "You want more and better celery."

"Exactly," said the farmer. "See you later. Remember what I told you."

The hired hand quickly discovered that growing more and better celery was demanding work. Weed pulling never stopped. He sweated under summer's blazing sun. His hands felt like blocks of ice when he processed celery in the late fall and early winter. He harvested 35,000 pounds per acre. But he concluded that raising celery was much too hard a way to make money. The celery farmer didn't return.

The next season the hired hand planted wheat instead of celery. He learned the methods of successful wheat farmers. He harvested thirty bushels per acre the first year. That increased to forty in the second year and fifty in the third. "The celery farmer will be overjoyed when he returns," he thought

One June day the celery farmer returned. He didn't recognize his farm. Instead of celery, wheat was everywhere. The celery farmer was angry. He'd made his will clear before he left. More and better celery is all that mattered to him. More and better wheat or corn or anything else is no substitute for more and better celery. The celery farmer fired the hired hand on the spot.

Churches use offerings and attendance as a measure of success. They're not terrible things. But measuring them isn't your Commission. You're to make more and better followers of Jesus (Matthew 28:18-20). Rewriting the job description Jesus gave you doesn't make God happy!

How can God use you to contribute to His Commission to make more and better followers of Jesus? Read Revelation 18.

256 Show Me Your Disciples

"Show Me your disciples," the Lord said to Bill during his Judgment Seat review.

"I went to church almost every Sunday for sixty years," said Bill.

"I know what you did every second of your life," said the Lord, "Show Me your disciples."

"I often helped out at the food bank," said Bill, "and we fed a lot of people."

"Feeding people should have been part of making disciples," said the Lord, "Show Me your disciples."

"I gave generously every Sunday," said Bill.

"I know exactly how much you gave," said the Lord, "Show Me your disciples."

"I served on the church board for twenty years," Bill said.

The Lord said, "I gave you that opportunity to empower the whole church to expand My kingdom by making disciples. Making disciples has been the goal from the beginning. Show Me your disciples."

The Lord continued, "I commanded you to make disciples of all people groups (Matthew 28:18-20). Following Jesus included completing your part in the disciple-making task. Feeding people was a caring bridge to win their trust and lead them to faith and spiritual maturity. Giving was the natural response to all I've given you. Part

of giving should've been sharing the difference I made in your life. Serving on the church board was an opportunity to organize and lead the congregation in the disciple-making mission. Show me those whom you've influenced to make Jesus the hub of their lives. Show Me your disciples.”

That scenario is convicting, isn't it? When you're a superficial Christian, you're blind to your purpose. Thinking you're saved so you can go to heaven when you die is a serious error. You're on earth to make disciples motivated by love for God and others. Do you know how to do that? Christian Growth Resources provides free evangelism resources, free Christian discipleship resources, and free Christian leadership resources to help. I challenge you to use them, so you won't be ashamed if you hear, “Show Me your disciples.”

How can you fine-tune your ministry to accomplish God's purpose for it? Read Revelation 19.

257 Distracted

Distracted can kill. Holli Platt said she forgot her baby in a hot car in Arizona. Her other three children, excited to buy things, distracted her. Fortunately, the baby lived.¹ Distracted driving includes driving under the influence of electronic devices. About 58 percent of teens involved in accidents are texting. Between 2015 and 2018, 14,730 died in the USA because of distracted driving.² Go to a restaurant and observe how distraction is more the rule than the exception. The family eating dinner has no conversation. All eyes are glued to phones. No one is fully present.

My wife has asked me to do a chore. Then, something else grabs my attention. I forget about the chore. Others can interpret my distraction as untrustworthiness in fulfilling my promises. Can you identify with being easily distracted? An Old Testament story can help you stay on track.

Moses gave the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh land east of the Jordan River. He did that before the Israelites conquered the land God had promised them (Numbers 32:33). He charged these tribes with helping the other tribes acquire the territory West of the Jordan River. Even though they already had their own land. After they completed the military operations, Joshua

commended them for a job well done. “For a long time now—to this very day—you have not deserted your fellow Israelites but have carried out the mission the LORD your God gave you” (Joshua 22:3, NIV). Nothing distracted them. They kept their promise. They were like repair people whom you fully pay before they start a job. They finish it anyway with fully focused faithfulness. Pursue the Great Commission God has given you with fully focused faithfulness!

What things distract you from fully focused faithfulness to God?

Read Revelation 20.

258 Second Chances and Last Impressions

You don’t get a second chance to make the first impression. But you’ve many chances to make a last impression. The last impressions are more accurate and realistic. First impressions often mislead. Not every glittering stone is a diamond. I conducted a man’s funeral service who didn’t attend any church. He was highly esteemed in town. Five minutes before the service began his daughter spit out angry words. “I don’t want you to say he was a nice man!” She went through his stuff after his death. She found letters from other women. She discovered her father’s unfaithfulness to her mother. Courtships usually begin with mutual five-star first impressions. They end weeks, months, or years later with mutual one-star last impressions! Angels somehow morph into demons!

You get many chances to make a last impression. Sam Ficken began his sophomore season at Penn State making only four of his first eleven field goal attempts. That’s not stellar! He finished the season kicking the ball between the uprights ten times in a row. Tom Brady was the 199th pick in the 2000 NFL draft. He’s now widely considered the greatest quarterback of all time. The early Christians’ first impression was that Saul (later Paul) threatened their very existence (Acts 8:3). He breathed out murderous threats against them (Acts 9:1). Today he’s considered the greatest missionary of all time. A good last impression is better than a good first one. One last impression matters most—God’s saying “well done” when you see Him face-to-face (Matthew 25:23)!

Why is it better to focus on making last impressions than first impressions?

Read Revelation 21.

259 Spiritual Laziness

Creatures on earth are naturally lazy. They expend as little energy as they can while consuming as many calories as possible. Cows don't run laps around the pasture! Fish don't compete in races. It's a supremely successful prewired survival strategy. Alligators, fish, cats, pigs, dogs, and others follow it. Doing so helps them reproduce after their kind. That's their purpose.

Laziness is in your genes. You need to overcome it. You have a noble purpose—to become like Jesus (Romans 8:29) and accomplish God's purpose for your life (Ephesians 2:10). Both require you to expend energy. God provides the internal power you need to fulfill His will for your life (Ephesians 1:19–20, Colossians 1:29). Yet, fulfilling your purpose is an ongoing struggle. Your biological makeup is more a resting cow than a diligent ant. Your tendency is to watch work rather than do it. You prefer to rest before rather than after you get tired.

If you were naturally diligent, you wouldn't need a supervisor to keep you working (2 Chronicles 2:18). God wouldn't command: "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the LORD." (Romans 12:11, NIV). The implication in Hebrews 6:12 is the lazy won't inherit what God has promised. You see the same truth in Matthew 25:26–30. There, the master described as lazy and worthless the servant who did nothing with the resources entrusted to him. He condemned him to darkness replete with weeping and gnashing of teeth. True faith works. Laziness is a genuine problem. Those who produce no spiritual fruit don't know God at all. Give yourself fully to the Lord's work, knowing it's never in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).

How does spiritual laziness hinder you from becoming like Jesus and accomplishing God's purpose for your life? What adjustments do you need to make? Read Revelation 22.

260 When Your Last Day Meets Your First Day

Do you feel pressured to stuff a quart of limited, precious life into a pint container? Would not feeling that pressure change your attitude in slow traffic or long lines? Suppose you knew you'd live

one thousand years. How would that affect your perspective on how much time you have to serve others today?

Dead-end living squeezes every drop of enjoyment from the sponge of life before the road ends. It sniffs all the flowers. It picks all the berries along the road that might end just over the hill. It has no hope of life beyond the grave. Death is a period, not a comma. It recoils from everything that wastes time.

How would your earthly perspective change if you knew your last day on earth merges seamlessly into your first day of forever? It does. Are you prepared for life beyond the grave? Jesus links your eternal destiny with your sacrifices for others during your earthly existence (Matthew 25:31–46). Those who minister to the needs of others will receive an inheritance prepared for them since the world's creation (Matthew 25:34). They serve the lowly and least on earth. Unknowingly, they're serving their King (Matthew 25:40).

By contrast, many people think almost exclusively about what's best for them on earth. They try to squeeze all the enjoyment from life that they can. They have a different fate. They didn't serve their King when they didn't serve the lowly and least. The King sends them away to eternal punishment (Matthew 25:46). Faith in Christ that saves also changes character and conduct. It produces love that serves others. Along life's road pick berries for others to eat and flowers for them to smell.

How are you preparing for forever? Read Genesis 1 and continue reading through the Old Testament at a chapter-a-day pace.

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