

HIS POWER FOR YOUR WEAKNESS

260 Steps Toward Spiritual Strength

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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 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.

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

God's Trustworthiness

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 promised He wouldn't leave or forsake His followers (Hebrews 13:5). He promised 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 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. You become God's child when you receive Jesus as your Forgiver and Leader (John 1:12).

When you invite Jesus into your life, He will enter and fellowship with you (Revelation 3:20). You have eternal life immediately. 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 500 people saw Him (1 Corinthians 15:6). Your assurance isn't based on your undependable performance. It depends on 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 has been an intellectual pursuit. Now it's considered a pseudoscience. It has no scientific validity or [explanatory power](#).¹

People looked to the stars and planets to interpret their lives for thousands of years. Astrology in the West includes horoscopes. They explain your personality and what will happen to you based on your birth date.

Believing in 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 unobtainable information. They're looking for power and control when they feel out of control.

Astrologers, like politicians, are liars who pretend to help you. They're 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 need

(Romans 8:32). Trust in God is the antidote to 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 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 truly 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.

Every day, you risk your life when you trust other drivers to stay 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. Even the demons believe that God exists (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 their faith or their own goodness. They trust their eternal destiny to Jesus alone and His finished work on the cross.

They depend on His resources to meet everyday problems. He's the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). Circumstances change. He doesn't. Christians trust 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 Category 5 hurricane somewhere over the horizon. No radar can detect it.

Jesus is the Captain of the only ship, the church, that will survive it. No one forces you to enter His vessel and join His crew. You can build your own 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 thing. Your decision is the most important one you'll ever make. It has eternal consequences.

Belief is a personal response. You can accept or reject Jesus and all He offers. Putting off the choice 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 makes you right 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 your 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 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. Second Corinthians 5:17 summarizes this change as becoming a new creation.

You have a new sense of freedom because God removes your guilt and forgives your sin. You want to please God and serve others.

You possess a new love for other Christians. You discover new power over sin and new joy and confidence. Through prayer, you find a new supply road opened to God’s storehouse.

In early April 1978, I drove fifty miles from Fargo, North Dakota, to Cormorant Lake, Minnesota, to go ice fishing. At the lake, two feet of open water ringed the ice along the shoreline.

I wasn’t about to give up. Although my faith shook 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 beneath me wasn’t.

God is like that ice. When you believe, you take a leap of faith. You land on the unflinching trustworthiness of God’s character and promises. What matters isn’t 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 to be.

Depending on feelings to gauge your relationship with God turns your spiritual life into an elevator! Responding to God is a choice. It includes giving God your body (Romans 12:1). Don't you think you can trust your body to Someone who sacrificed His body for you?

Why does measuring your closeness to God by your feelings bring great instability to life? Read Matthew 6.

7 Believing in God Is Not Enough (4)

Belief has content, but you must go beyond simply agreeing with the facts. The first four letters of the English alphabet summarize the narrow way to eternal life.

A represents admit. To begin a right relationship with God, you must admit that you have a disease the Bible calls sin.

The symptoms include denying God's right to rule over you, rejecting His moral boundaries, and falling short of right living. If you ignore this disease, the inevitable result is separation from God forever (Romans 6:23).

B represents believe. Becoming a Christian requires believing that Jesus is Lord, God in the flesh who came to your rescue. He became fully human 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 free you from the paralyzing grip of sin (John 8:36).

C represents considering 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. It stinks.

The La-Z-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. He alone qualifies to run the new operation.

He's cleaned and lit 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:

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. 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 want, make them your own. Realize that you're talking to the living Lord Jesus. He knows your sincerity and will honor your 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 that 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 at His word! Don’t depend on your feelings. They can lead you astray very quickly.

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

Read the Bible daily. Begin with Matthew. Write briefly in a notebook what you’ve learned and how you will apply it 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 so you become more like Him. Turn your worries into prayers (Philippians 4:6–7).

Attend worship at 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 continually to the control of the Holy Spirit of Christ who lives in you (Ephesians 5:18).

Which of these 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 the first step in a lifelong commitment to change how you think, feel, and behave. Marathon runners train for their event. Just as they discipline themselves to run faster, you must discipline yourself to live better. The goal is to become like Jesus (Romans 8:29).

Only God can make “chicken salad” (the Jesus-like) out of “chicken feathers” (the self-centered). But 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 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 takes time.

Daily reading, understanding, and applying the Bible to life are essential to discipleship. 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. Spiritually mature people apply the Bible wisely to life’s daily decisions.

Other essentials for spiritual growth include talking with God daily in 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

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 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 slept only 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 that my energy tank is 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 in need of nothing. Jesus said they were “wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked” (Revelation 3:17 NIV). They needed to recognize and correct their lukewarmness.

The primary evidence that you're guilty of this deadly assumption is complacency about your "wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked" condition. Apply spiritual truth to yourself before you apply it to others.

Quit considering exposure to unapplied truth a virtuous spiritual shower. It's not. A stable, wise person 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 stop pretending you don't need them.

*How is falsely insisting we're okay hazardous to our spiritual health?
Read Matthew 10.*

11 Handling Guilt God's Way

I feel guilty when I waste food. 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 those rules don't carry divine authority. Your real guilt problem is this: Where God says, "Don't," you did, and where He says, "Do," you didn't—repeatedly. How do you deal with genuine guilt in God's way?

You're guilty because you've fallen short of God's standards. You may attempt to compensate for your failures by doing good. 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. But God's gracious 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 Jesus' death in your place washes away guilt.

In Jesus, you have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins because of 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 to or farther from God? How is trusting 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. 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 like Jesus. Nothing less will do. You fall short of that perfect, unchangeable standard, which Romans 3:23 describes as God's glory. No one does good (Romans 3:12).

Recognizing your badness (compared to Jesus) is 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 toward acknowledging that you need God's grace.

God gives grace (undeserved favor) to the humble. But He resists proud people (James 4:6).

Exalting and congratulating yourself exposes you to the hurricane headwinds of your Creator's opposition. It reveals that you don't understand how far short of Jesus' goodness you fall. It shows that 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, bad people—not proud, 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 water containing it can cause diarrhea, vomiting, and blistering around the mouth. In 2011, it covered two thousand square miles of Lake Erie; in 2017, it covered 700 square miles. Why?

The Great Black Swamp was southwest of Lake Erie. After people drained it, the land 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. Fertilizer runs off the fields, and the Maumee River carries it into Lake Erie. Erie's blue-green algae

population explodes, sucking up these nutrients like trillions of miniature vacuum cleaners.

Interestingly, these corn, soybean, and alfalfa farmers agree that fertilizer runoff causes the blue-green algae problem. But they think somebody else is responsible. They're not the ones 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 accept blame they deserve. Immature people reject the blame they deserve.

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 and 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 first, and then you devour it.

Sometimes forbidden desires tempt you. You playfully maneuver them with the paws of your mind. The Bible calls them sins.

You often covet something you can't have (Romans 7:8). You know you shouldn't go 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 sin, it's actually playing with you—and preparing to devour you. It wages war against 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). Though they seem 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 when it's really the cat (Hebrews 3:13). It's fun to have a play date 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 watered the zucchini daily but not the yard.

My Uncle Bill grew beautiful celery stalks for the market. He couldn't have done it without irrigation. Almost 60 years ago, I watched him walk through the celery field, holding a wire while water spurted from the irrigation lines.

He'd stop here and there to 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 flow from you to nurture the spiritual health and growth in others (John 7:38).

The water represents the results 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.

You'll have the aroma of Christ in your life (Ephesians 5:1–2) and drip with the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23). You can't be a hose that transports water without getting 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 work to keep the lawn of your life dry, brown, and crunchy underfoot. That describes going your way instead of God's way.

Your sinful nature continually desires independence. When you yield to its urgings, you stop following Christ to seek greater “freedom” elsewhere.

Soon, you rediscover that “freedom” doesn’t satisfy. It doesn’t bring the full, meaningful life that the straight-and-narrow Freedom Road does (John 10:10).

Let’s face it: you’re a clogged nozzle at times. A wire unclogged the nozzles in Uncle Bill’s irrigation lines. Confessing and turning from independence 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 give an AK-47 and a thousand rounds of ammunition to a known terrorist. It’s not wise for your health—or anyone else’s.

But you might arm your health’s enemy by ingesting too much sugar. You’re addicted to it! The unintended results can include dental problems, 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 for tests until the night before. Then he’d study all night. His repeated procrastination prevented him from doing his best on exams.

Not everyone learns from mistakes. He didn't. Sometimes, I don't either. Experience alone doesn't teach. Evaluated experience and corrective action enable us to change course.

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 others.

Feeding fear increases worry and reinforces anxiety. Lying undermines trustworthiness. Overeating, too little sleep, and too little exercise 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 as though 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 their feeders' hands.

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 in 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 people who watched the video. Many said they couldn’t jettison paralyzing guilt over actions they were often too ashamed to reveal.

There’s a difference between being guilty and feeling guilty. God declared the Israelites guilty because of their actions. 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 may not feel any guilt for their offenses.

Similarly, the Israelites rarely felt guilty enough to turn from their wrongdoing. King David was an exception. He acknowledged his sin and guilt, calling 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 for your sins in full (1 Peter 3:18; Romans 5:6). The crushing weight of 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. 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 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 with whom?

In 1970, the winning throw at the Penn Relays was about 270 feet, and the American record was 300 feet.

Have you ever won an award for outstanding performance? If so, how does your best compare with the best in the world?

Accurate measurements require a standard. The yard was once based on the distance between two lines on a bronze bar made in 1845. The metric standard of mass was once a one-kilogram solid cylinder of platinum-iridium alloy maintained near Paris.

Jesus' words, actions, and attitudes are God's standard of "good." You must stand back-to-back with Him and not fall short by even a fraction of a moral millimeter. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else.

The God who became like you must remake you so that 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 told 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 people are good.¹ We greatly 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 you were punished. Sometimes you weren't.

You've bashed through God's wise and lovingly established boundaries. God'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 you and gone your way (1 Timothy 1:9). You don't want anyone to tell you what to do. Not even God.

The most common biblical word for sin 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 with a need you can meet.

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 pronounce good the heart that 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 clearly, 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. But you want the glory for yourself.

You want others to know about the good you've done. God is not impressed. Romans 3:27 and Ephesians 2:9 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!

Moral perfection is the standard. Only Jesus has it. "Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it" (James 2:10). It's 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? Wouldn't 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.

In the Old Testament, animal sacrifices substituted for the death of sinners. Sheep, oxen, goats, and doves took their places.

The animals had to be perfect, unblemished specimens. The person making a burnt offering placed a hand on the animal (Leviticus 1:4), symbolizing identification with the sacrifice. The animal was accepted on the person's behalf.

Through faith, you place your hand on Jesus, the Lamb of God. He bears your sins, and His righteousness is credited to you.

He died for the ungodly (Romans 5:6)—not for perfect people but for messed-up ones. You qualify! Jesus paid the penalty for your sin. He tasted death for everyone (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 goodness that can endure the light and fire of God's judgment. You receive it when you trust in Him.

Karen Clemente was in a bus terminal in Times Square, waiting to take a bus to Hoboken, New Jersey. A scruffy-looking man asked her for change for the bus. He couldn't afford the fare.

Walking toward the bus's open door, she couldn't decide whether to help him. 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 your sin being transferred to Jesus and His righteousness to you affect how you think about yourself today? Read Matthew 21.

Chapter 3

Milk for Spiritual 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 lies. It says it feeds five when it only feeds two!

Nutritionists observe that what we eat and how much we eat affect our health. They suggest that one serving of animal protein is the size of a deck of cards. One-half cup of fruits and vegetables is about the size of a computer mouse. A baked potato serving is about the size of your fist.

There is another kind of portion control—how we use our time. That significantly affects our spiritual health.

Life expectancy in the USA is about 80. In the Philippines, it's about 69. How are you using the time God gives you? 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 onto 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 have 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! If you love Him, pile Him on your plate.

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 fundamentals of the Christian faith. They sum up what Christians believe and 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 sees me do it while watching through his bedroom window.

Imagine I later find myself in a financial bind. I ask him for a one-hundred-dollar loan. What an irrational request!

He pulls five twenties from his wallet and says, "I'm not going to loan you the money. I'm going to give it to you." That's grace! I won't damage his car again.

You've done untold damage to God's purposes and to people created in His image. We all have.

Nevertheless, God actively pursues you with His grace through His Son, Jesus Christ (Luke 15:1–7). He forgives your sins by His undeserved favor when you trust in the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice on the cross in your place.

He then expects you to forgive others who have offended you (Matthew 6:14–15) and to live for Jesus, who died for you (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). That is part of becoming more like Jesus. 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 can address anything, although it always operates in harmony with His sovereign will.

Grace was on display throughout Jesus' life. Emotional, physical, and spiritual problems yielded as His grace flowed to people in need.

Grace is more about changing you than changing your circumstances. Your biggest problem is the gap between your

character and Jesus' character. God's purpose is to make you more like Him (Romans 8:29).

Do you need the right words to speak to someone who is hurting? Do you need wisdom to make a crucial decision? Do you need courage to live against the prevailing ungodly current of life? Whatever you need today that is consistent with God's will, His grace will supply.

Gratitude changes how you think, feel, and behave. It springs from recognizing that God constantly gives you what you don't deserve.

A Pennsylvania wrestler once volunteered to forfeit a match to an injured opponent so the injured wrestler could earn his 100th career victory 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 overflow with gratitude 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 my first dozen years as a Christian, my goal was to read through the Bible every year.

I read like someone chewing highly nutritious broccoli while swallowing very little of it. Please learn from my mistake.

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).

How much of the Bible you read every year matters less than how much of the Bible gets through you. Biblical information without transformation isn’t discipleship.

Beginning in December 1981, I read less but tried to apply something from what I read daily. Now it takes me about three years to read through the Bible at a one-chapter-a-day rate.

I write the date, what I read, and what I hear God saying to me. 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 work 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 begins with recognizing that you’ve acted like a fool and erred greatly. Then turn 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 life’s 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 recommend it.

When nothing in the chapter speaks to my heart, the Life Application Study Bible's notes usually do. Writing down what you hear God say helps Velcro the truth to your heart.

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 a grade 12 reading level. The New International Version is at a grade 7–8 reading level. The NIV is the most popular English version.

The New Living Translation is at a grade 6 reading level. The NLT is the second most popular English version. Only the 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 and is now in its third edition.

3. An online concordance can deepen your study. At BibleGateway.com, you can search for biblical words in an online Bible offering more than 150 versions in over 50 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 background. It explains the Bible's people, places, things, books, and customs. You can access an online Bible dictionary at BibleStudyTools.com.

4. Let the Bible explain itself. Matthew 7:7–8 doesn't guarantee that you will get everything you ask from God. Other passages, such as James 4:3, describe conditions for answered prayer. Interpret a verse in light of the whole Bible's teaching on 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 a passage is prose or poetry.

6. The author's original intention is the key to a verse's meaning. But there can be many applications.

7. Understanding the grammar of the original languages and the 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 light of clear ones. Ephesians 2:8–10 describes how good deeds relate to salvation more clearly than James 2:24.

9. Research what words meant to the biblical authors. Two helpful resources are Nelson's Expository Dictionary of the Old Testament, by Merrill F. Unger and William White Jr., and An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words by W. E. Vine. An online version of Vine's dictionary is available at 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 every detail.

12. Pray for the Holy Spirit to guide you into all truth (John 16:13).

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. Discipline is like water, sunshine, and fertilizer for a plant. It enables you to reach 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. Allow me to share some personal examples.

I read the Bible daily while I eat breakfast. I pray while doing my stretching exercises. I eat three meals a day but not between meals (except for evening ice cream!). I have regular times and places for strength-building exercises.

Having a time and place for each of these activities helps me 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!

When and where do you read the Bible and pray? If you don't yet have a place and time, when will you establish them? Read Matthew 26.

27 Daily Time with God

To be physically healthy and fit, you must eat healthy food and regularly do cardiovascular and muscle-strengthening exercises. To maintain your weight, calories burned must be balanced with calories consumed. Experts recommend eating a variety of fruits and vegetables and limiting 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. Read it daily, think about how it relates to you, and apply it to boost your spiritual vitality.

Reading without application is like chewing without swallowing. Applying what you read 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 God hiding His face, turning away in anger, rejecting, or forsaking.

Daily, seek God as earnestly as you would seek ice 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 each day when you are alert for prayer and Bible reading. Select a place where no one will interrupt you (Mark 1:35).

Read a chapter of Scripture daily. Start with the New Testament. A study Bible such as the Life Application Study Bible can help you understand its background, meaning, and application.

Write the date, what Scripture you read, and one to three sentences of personal application. Talk to God about your concerns (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 goes away. Wrinkles appear uninvited. You take more trips to the bathroom. 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 remain 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 when the environment is suitable. You’re responsible for cultivating that 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 grow as a Christian.

Evidence of spiritual growth includes character development, 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—love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23). This transformation starts with renewed 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 and create a life-and-death situation.

The best defense against them is a clean body and clean food and water. 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 your immune system contain and destroy invaders. When disease-causing organisms outnumber or overpower your defenses, 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 when you're most vulnerable. Continual cleansing is your first-line defense.

You need not collapse under their attack. You fight the invaders best if your soul is rested, well-fed, and properly exercised. You aid the disease-causing organisms that threaten you when you cheat on sleep, skip meals, and neglect exercise.

When you neglect feeding and exercising 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 harder to spend the time needed for firsthand experience. Other people's spirituality benefits you no more than their food does.

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 119:9, 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 is foolish to neglect it.

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

30 Feeding Yourself Spiritually (2)

Advertisers entice you to buy products with less than one percent of the Bible's intrinsic worth. You purchase things that'll rust out or wear out. How much 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. It no longer looks white when seen against the background of new-fallen snow. If you judge

yourself against 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. “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:2 NIV). 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 the input.

Spiritual output depends on spiritual input. Thistle seeds don’t produce apple trees. Worldly thinking doesn’t produce spiritual fruit.

Unless you choose to channel God’s word into your mind, you’ll conform to worldly thinking as surely as night follows day. Furthermore, you’ll believe you’re a fine, church-attending community pillar. 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 make time for the things you 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 starting, begin with six or seven minutes of Bible reading each day. Add three or four minutes of prayer. Soon, you'll want to spend more time.

Choose a regular, quiet place to commune with God. Mine is the kitchen table. Go there when your mind is sharpest. For me, that's early in the morning.

Time with God includes reading and digesting His word. Talk with Him about everything 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 should your habits, work, witness, finances, and ministry change?

One day I was reading Jeremiah 45. In verse 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 great 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 and apply it to my life. I've used a Life Application Bible for my devotional reading for many years. The first time through it, I read the Scripture and all the notes.

Now I read the notes if nothing jumps out at me from the chapter I read that day. That's more common when I'm reading the Old Testament than the New Testament.

I write in one to three sentences what stood out to me. I try 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 at first. Stick with it. The joy often trickles in slowly.

There's no substitute for firsthand spiritual experience with God. There's no easy, quick way to become like Jesus.

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

Chapter 4

God Teaches You

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 with the incomprehensible 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 and promised His presence throughout the process (Matthew 28:18–20). The Holy Spirit provides the power to complete the task (Acts 1:8).

The goal is to make people all over the world more like Jesus (Romans 8:29). Jesus Himself reveals the Father (John 14:9), and the Holy Spirit continues His work in believers (John 14:16). The fruit of the Spirit consists of Jesus-like characteristics (Galatians 5:22–23).

Discipleship starts with God. He shapes us to become like Jesus while retaining our uniqueness.

Tiffany stamps its jewelry with the Tiffany & Co. mark. God stamps every disciple with the three-dimensional mark of faith, hope, and love (1 Corinthians 13:13). These qualities identify authentic followers of Jesus.

Disciples trust God. That's faith. They confidently expect Him to 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.

Discipleship has three goals—to draw people to Jesus, disciple them, and deploy them in ministry. Jesus multiplied workers for discipleship. So should we.

The best way to draw people to Jesus is to love them sacrificially and meet their needs. Once they come to faith, the next step is to tell and show them how to live as Jesus did.

We copy Jesus. They imitate the Jesus-like in us. Eventually, they become dependent on Jesus. Then others can copy what is like Jesus in them.

Discipleship has three fields of operation—local, regional, and worldwide. Acts 1:8 gives this pattern: beginning in Jerusalem (local), then Judea and Samaria (regional), and finally to the ends of the earth.

Discipleship starts in our own families and communities. Our communities need to hear the good news and see us and our churches 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 false information, whether spread deliberately or unintentionally. Disinformation is deliberately false or misleading information. In 2020, life dumped both on 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 warning. God said that 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).

Jesus further describes him 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, multifaceted, extraordinarily successful plan 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 about Jesus' identity and mission. The deception also concerns your 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. First John reveals their interconnectedness.

"We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands" (1 John 2:3 NIV). "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 NIV).

"The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them" (1 John 3:24a NIV). "And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister" (1 John 4:21 NIV).

"In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3 NIV).

Belief, obedience, and love grow and intertwine throughout your life as a believer. You keep believing, loving, and obeying.

The vault of time contains yesterday's belief, obedience, and love. Today's opportunities to serve God and others require a fresh flow of all three.

When your vital signs indicate that all isn't well, your doctor prescribes a treatment plan. A fever suggests an infection that needs attention. High blood pressure might require medication.

Your spiritual vital signs—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, giving you the desire and ability to follow His ways (Philippians 2:12–13). His Spirit lives and works in 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 gradually replace 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 create an environment 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 guardrails at 100 mph?

Have 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 the choking weeds of worldly ways of thinking and acting from your life. When I first trusted Christ, getting was more important than giving, speaking than listening, and being served than serving.

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. Think about 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 can include praying Scripture into your life. For example, here is 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. Give me 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 experience inward renewal despite outward wasting away (2 Corinthians 4:16). In your weakness, God's power is made 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. As a new Christian, I memorized seventy-five verses in the Navigators' Topical Memory System. Years passed.

I forgot them. Without review, memorized Scripture leaks away. 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.

I review about seven verses daily while 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

once did. I challenge you to learn them and continue reviewing them. My three-week review cycle follows:

Week 1 – Sunday – Matthew 4:4, Hebrews 4:12, Jeremiah 15:16, John 16:24, Matthew 21:22, Philippians 4:6–7, Romans 12:1. Monday – John 14:21, Hebrews 5:8, Matthew 4:19, Acts 1:8, Matthew 28:19–20, Romans 3:23, Romans 6:23. Tuesday – Hebrews 9:27, Romans 5:8, Ephesians 2:8–9, John 5:24, John 1:12, Revelation 3:20, 1 John 5:13. Wednesday – John 5:24, James 1:5, Isaiah 30:18, Proverbs 3:5–6, 1 Corinthians 10:13, Romans 8:37, John 3:30. Thursday – Galatians 2:20, 2 Corinthians 5:15, 1 Corinthians 6:19–20, John 14:26, John 4:23, Psalm 103:13–14, John 3:16. Friday – Jeremiah 31:3, Isaiah 49:15–16, Hebrews 13:5, Isaiah 26:3, John 14:2–3, Romans 8:32, Philippians 4:19. Saturday – Luke 6:38, Psalm 62:11, Matthew 11:28–30, Psalm 147:3–5, 1 Chronicles 29:11–12, John 1:14.

Week 2 – Sunday – Deuteronomy 6:6–7, Genesis 22:18, Isaiah 59:21, Ecclesiastes 10:1, Ecclesiastes 8:11, 1 Samuel 15:22–23. Monday – Proverbs 17:27–28, Romans 4:17b, 20–21, Luke 9:23, John 8:31, Isaiah 32:17, Colossians 2:6–7. Tuesday – Psalm 1, Psalm 23, Psalm 84:11, Psalm 62:5, Psalm 27:14, Isaiah 40:31, 2 Peter 3:14, 1 Thessalonians 4:15–16, Revelation 20:15. Wednesday – Psalm 61:2, Isaiah 63:9, Psalm 18:1–2, Psalm 46:1, 10, Isaiah 26:3, John 13:13–14, Philippians 2:3–4, Proverbs 13:10, Colossians 3:23–24. Thursday – Philippians 4:13, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Hebrews 4:15–16, 2 Peter 1:2–3, 2 Corinthians 9:8, 1 Corinthians 1:9, 2 Thessalonians 3:3, Hebrews 1:9, Philippians 4:8. Friday – Psalm 27:4, 8, Psalm 107:9, Isaiah 43:4, Deuteronomy 1:11, Galatians 6:7. Saturday – 1 Chronicles 16:10–12, Hebrews 11:6, Ephesians 4:29, James 1:19–20, Hebrews 10:38.

Week 3 – Sunday – John 15:5, Hebrews 10:25, Colossians 1:18, John 14:15. Monday – 1 Peter 2:2, Psalm 119:9, 11, Ephesians 5:18, Galatians 5:22–23. Tuesday – 1 John 2:16, Ephesians 6:11–12, Proverbs 3:34, 1 Corinthians 6:12. Wednesday – Psalm 119:15–16, Matthew 22:37–39, John 4:24, 1 Corinthians 10:14. Thursday – 1 Corinthians 11:26, John 15:8, Romans 1:16. Friday – 1 Timothy 2:2, Romans 12:11, 1 Corinthians 12:7. Saturday – Isaiah 64:8, 1 Corinthians 4:2, John 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 in fishing. When people feel stressed, they’re often 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 bridge the conversation to spiritual things. The first is for people facing tough times. Ask, “Do you want 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. Spend about one minute describing what your life was like before

receiving Jesus as your Forgiver and Leader, a second minute explaining what you did to receive Him, and a third minute explaining why it's the best thing that has 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 the answer is yes, you can review "How to Become Jesus' Follower."

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. The penalty for not measuring up to that standard is death (Romans 6:23). We have a problem.

The second thing to know is that Jesus died on the cross in your place (Romans 5:8). God showered His unmerited favor upon you, doing more than you could ever 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 demonstrated that God accepted 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 turn from living 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 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. You become God's child when you receive Jesus (John 1:12).

You can open the door to Him with the following prayer. It has no magic words. It merely expresses willingness to live 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. 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. You might think that throwing a shot put, discus, or javelin as far as possible requires all-out muscular effort. In reality, the best throwers are very relaxed.

I helped my Uncle Bill plant celery. We occupied the two seats on his celery planter as it moved slowly through the field. We each held

a handful of celery plants in our left hands and placed them in designated slots in a rotating wheel.

Uncle Bill did it better than I did. I hurried 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 would 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 seems contrary to common sense. The last thing we want to do is die. Yet dying to self-centered living is the first thing we must 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 those 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. Sacrificial love produces joy. You can't freeze, can, or dry joy. You must harvest it freshly 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 desires and agenda brought you 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, even when there are good reasons to do so.

Habits like brushing your teeth, bathing, and eating healthy foods can enrich your life. Other habits entrap you like a fly struggling in a spider web.

It's wise to strengthen vitality-building habits and eliminate vitality-draining ones. The most difficult step in forming a beneficial habit is often the first one.

Nothing will benefit you more than developing habits that nurture your spiritual growth, especially if you are new to or young in your walk with Jesus.

I suggest the 1-2-3-4 Discipleship Challenge. So, what is it?

The 1 represents reading one chapter of the Bible each day, beginning with Matthew in the New Testament, in a version you can understand. I use the New International Version.

Write one sentence about 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. Over time, it will 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 daily. It may involve making a phone call, meeting a need, writing an encouraging note, sending a card, working in a food bank, providing a meal, or sharing spiritual insights.

The possibilities are endless. Demonstrate God's love in at least two practical ways each day (1 Peter 3:9).

The 3 represents three minutes of reflection on the chapter you read. This might include reading the notes on the chapter in a study Bible. Think about how the chapter applies to you before writing your one application sentence.

The 4 represents spending at least four minutes in prayer each day: praising God for who 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 of Him (Philippians 4:6–7). That's the 1-2-3-4 Discipleship Challenge. The next step is up to you!

Who holds you accountable for the 1-2-3-4 Discipleship Challenge? Read Mark 11.

40 31 Steps Toward Christian Maturity

Following Jesus can be challenging. It can feel like traveling through 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 one of life's hardest assignments. It requires denying yourself (Luke 9:23) and living for the One who died for you (2 Corinthians 5:15).

That's about as popular as a presidential candidate whose big idea is raising the federal income tax rate to 100 percent! Jesus calls for a 100 percent self-denial rate in your life. He doesn't have a Plan B.

Hopefully, you don't think discipleship is only for the spiritual elite. If you believe in Jesus but want to live life as you choose, read Luke 9:23 three times and think carefully about what it says.

There's no room in God's kingdom for "believers" who refuse to follow Jesus. Learning to follow Him is a process. But thinking that following Him is optional is "stinking thinking." Saving faith in Jesus changes your character and conduct as you follow Him (1 Corinthians 6:9–11).

31 Steps Toward Spiritual Maturity 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 on the Rock (Matthew 7:24–27). It's more about doing than knowing.

You can introduce it to others who can share it as well. If you already spend time with God daily...

I invite you to check out 31 Steps Toward Christian Maturity at [Steps to Spiritual Maturity | Christian Growth Resources](#). Read Mark 12.

41 Spiritual Journey Tracker

Check each statement that's true of you, and work on those 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 worshiping 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 use 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 passions, 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

God Hears 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 natural laws have regulated everything since the beginning. God doesn't intervene. Miracles don't happen. They consider reading the Bible and praying useless activities.

By contrast, Christians believe God communicates with humans through the Bible, and 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 and 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 recognizing that Jesus' words are God speaking to you.

The phone represents prayer. You can speed-dial God whenever and wherever you want, about whatever concerns you. You don't need a PIN to begin a conversation with Him.

It doesn't have to be a 911 situation. He cherishes His children calling 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! He has texted you the answers to your most pressing questions before you even asked them!

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 rather than convincing God to give you what you want (Romans 8:29). The acrostic PRAYER can help you develop a balanced prayer life. It stands for Praise, Rely, Admit, Yield, Express Thanks, and Request.

Praise - Praise consists of 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 fueled by gratitude, His praise should always be on your lips (Psalm 34:1).

Rely - Rely on Jesus, His teachings, and His finished work on the cross. Trust God no matter what. Prayer without faith does not please God (Hebrews 11:6).

Trust Jesus to do what is best rather than trusting your own wisdom. If you don't get what you ask for, don't despair. Trust God to give you what is best.

Admit - When you confess your sins, God promises to forgive you 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 process of becoming like Jesus.

Yield - Prayer demonstrates your dependence on God. He knows what's best for you. You don't. 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 measures 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). Give thanks for everything (Ephesians 5:20) and in all circumstances (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

Request - God's Spirit guides your requests for yourself and others. Ask God for the wisdom to know what you need most (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, over time you'll understand 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 learn 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—no longer relevant.

They reject the truth that God speaks through His word in every age. They don't listen or obey when He speaks through it.

They play the same intentional-deafness card 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 communicated His will to my heart. He wanted me to move toward vocational 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

communicated the same message. He continued to point me in that direction while I resisted. I finally gave in so I could have peace.

For years, I wasn't willing to do what He wanted. 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 that someone assigned me to give a short devotional. He told me only one hour before I had to give it. I thought that was short notice. I was to focus on a specific topic.

Here is where the dream got crazy. An extremely soft-spoken woman sat on my left. She told me the topic I was to address. The background noise in the room was like a rock concert.

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 no idea what she said.

After that, another task distracted me for a while. Later, a man asked 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 give 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. Unimportant things distract you. You neglect to do the good works God lays before you (Ephesians 2:10).

Furthermore, the details of what you're supposed to do often aren't clear. God speaks softly through His Word, circumstances, and other people.

The background noise of the "worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things" (Mark 4:19 NIV) drowns out His voice. Our problem is allowing all that background noise to distract us.

Jesus did His Father's will (John 8:29). Withdrawing to lonely places to pray helped Him stay focused on His Father's will (Luke 5:16). Spending quiet time with God significantly increases our ability to hear Him.

It'll be interesting when we see God face to face. We'll discover how much of what we did on earth was what we 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 haven't attended classes all semester. Tomorrow is the final exam.

That dream reveals my fear of failure, and preparation is my go-to strategy for avoiding 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 on our own. I water, fertilize, and weed the tomatoes in my garden. I can't make them grow. Only God can.

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 prepares for the conflict, but the Lord delivers the victory.

Nehemiah diligently prepared to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. He also prayed and fasted before approaching King Artaxerxes with his request to go to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:4). He shot an arrow prayer while making his request (Nehemiah 2:4).

He asked for letters to the governors of the lands west of the Euphrates River granting him safe passage through their territories (Nehemiah 2:7). He also requested a letter to Asaph authorizing timber for the project (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 being rebuilt (Nehemiah 4:13). Nehemiah prayed for God to act, planned carefully, and continued praying 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 Jesus transformed. Prem's problems started when he broke one of his toes. His feet became numb. While doctors were treating him at a local hospital, they discovered there was no blood flow in his leg. They referred him to another hospital in the city.

By the time he arrived, his leg had become gangrenous and black. The doctors wanted to amputate it.

He didn't want to lose his leg or face the difficulties that would bring. He endured the pain for months, even though it made him miserable. His family members treated him like an outcast.

He spent money on witch doctors, but they didn't help. The gangrene continued to spread. Eventually, he 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 Paul, a Christian relative, 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 Prem what he had done. The gangrene had improved, and his blood circulation was perfect. The doctor insisted that Prem's recovery was impossible. He packed Prem's leg with gauze and discharged him.

Prem's serious leg infection, which had lasted for a year, healed within 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' 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.

You can't snap your fingers 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 to make a lasting spiritual impact.

Dr. Thom Rainer, author of *Effective Evangelistic Churches*, studied 576 churches. Each had twenty-six or more conversions per year.

More than 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?

Claim 2 Peter 3:9. God doesn't want anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance. Believe that God wants to save them because He has laid them on your heart.

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

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

Pray that God will give them such dissatisfaction with life apart from Him that they'll want to change and live God's way instead of their own.

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

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

Pray that they'll understand the impossibility of gaining a right relationship with God through good works.

Pray that God will answer the questions that are blocking them from a relationship with Him.

Ask God to send people who will communicate the gospel to them through word and deed.

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

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

49 Pray-giarism

Plagiarism is taking someone else's work or ideas and passing them off as your own. 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 using Psalm 100. "Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth" (Psalm 100:1 NIV). Here are examples of shouting for joy to the Lord:

"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 5:21)! I'm an 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 hymnbook and prayer book.

Spiritual passion accompanies spiritual health. True worship is offered gladly 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. I'm guessing that will lift your spirit.

"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 and 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 I 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 your prayers are 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

Freedom in Jesus

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 was 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 matter what appears on that end-of-life list? For Christians, it does!

I read an obituary that identified a man's defining passion as his love for hunting, fishing, and the outdoors. Reading it made me uncomfortable.

A picture of me surrounded by all the fish I've caught would include far more than 14,314. My collection would stink more than Deb Hoffman's! 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 400 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 over time you can lose the reins and let them run wild.

Your passions can easily become idols. They can receive 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 loving your neighbor as yourself? If not, you may be leading those who watch you astray. You're living as though 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 11 years old on my most memorable Christmas Day. Our family wasn't flush with cash when my brothers and I were growing up.

With five boys in the family and only my father working outside the home, money was limited. We didn't get or expect many presents.

That Christmas Day, we finished the festivities in the living room and unwrapped our gifts for another year. We didn't get birthday presents.

My father told us to take the torn wrapping paper out to the garage and dispose of it. When we entered the garage, we were shocked.

Three red bicycles were 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 celebrates another gift no one saw coming.

The Jews had been looking for their promised Deliverer throughout much of their history. They imagined He would be like King David, who had reigned about 1,000 years before Jesus was born.

What they never saw coming was that He wouldn’t come as a political deliverer. He came as a spiritual Deliverer. They didn’t recognize that their spiritual bondage was far more serious than their political bondage.

What they never imagined was that the Lord Himself would enter the world. He appeared as a fully human, helpless child and 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 the Kennedy brothers, but the Melanoma brothers! Melanoma is the most dangerous form of skin cancer.

About 35 years ago, I alerted my brother to a dark mole on his back. He had it checked. It was beginning to develop into melanoma, and a doctor removed it.

My dermatologist detected melanoma on my left cheek in 2015 and arranged for its removal. I still have a scar. In both cases, another person's intervention may have saved us from premature death.

Going your own way, independent of God, also leads to death. Like melanoma, the threat to your well-being isn't obvious at first.

God sees it with perfect clarity. 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 for yourself instead of for Him. It happens all at once when you trust in Jesus' death in your place as full payment 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 lifelong process in which God works in you as you depend on and obey Him.

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 happens 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 construct mine. This wall protects you 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 who's most likely to breach it and harm you. It's the rascal inside the wall. Your errant thoughts and uncontrolled emotions can lead to self-destructive decisions and actions.

You're your own worst enemy. Stinking thinking plus emotional commotion produces deeds deep in the weeds. We've all been there.

The wall is your 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. In Matthew 9:4, Jesus 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 for building a wall that helps prevent self-destructive 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 was using so much energy to fight it that I had an energy crisis.

You can get the flu by inhaling tiny virus-containing droplets released when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

You can also infect yourself by touching your eyes, nose, or mouth after touching a virus-contaminated object. The virus attaches to your cells, enters them, and replicates. Then it infects other cells. Fortunately, most people recover within several days.

Another “virus” attaches to you, replicates, and infects your life. It’s far more dangerous than the flu virus. No vaccine can prevent it. No doctor can cure it.

You may feel fine physically, although some forms of it steal decades from your life through destructive addictions. It cripples your moral and spiritual life, often without your realizing it.

You’re born with it. You also pick up new “strains” from others.

Like cancer, it can spread unnoticed. It takes over your whole life. Seven years from now, you'll be no better without outside intervention. 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 during the previous 43 years. Still, it was hard to part with them. Although they didn't fit, they were spit-polished with nostalgia! They were the last concrete link to my PFC days.

Focusing on the past 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.

They might even involve remembering yesterday's victories and successes and basking 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 could hinder him from 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 successes.

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

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 can get the flu by inhaling tiny droplets released when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

You can also infect yourself by touching your eyes, nose, or mouth after touching a virus-contaminated object. The virus attaches to your cells, enters them, and replicates. Then it infects other cells. Fortunately, the illness usually passes within several 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 some forms of it steal decades from your life through life-destroying addictions. It hamstring your moral and spiritual life. You may not even know it.

You're born with it. You also pick up new "strains" of it from others.

Like cancer, it spreads unannounced. It can take over your whole life. Seven years from now, you'll be no better without outside intervention. 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.

56 What Is Real Freedom (1)

On July Fourth, the United States celebrates its independence 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 brings true freedom. Jesus said that knowing the truth sets you free (John 8:32).

One lie you may believe is that more _____ will make you happy. Jesus said it won't (Luke 12:15).

Another lie: "I'm a loser because I messed up." Let the one who has 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 isn’t. Get over it! Countless other lies enslave you.

What controls you? Addiction is a dominant face of evil in twenty-first-century America. Real freedom and addiction can’t coexist.

Common addictions include alcohol, tobacco, drugs, work, the internet, gaming, caffeine, television, unhealthy relationships, negativity and self-doubt, exercise, shopping, food, gambling, and pornography. An addicted person is like a mosquito riding on an elephant and 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” through the Holy Spirit’s power. Christian freedom is the ability, through God’s power, to do what you ought to do. Political freedom is great. Spiritual freedom is far greater.

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

57 What Is Real Freedom? (2)

In November 1976, I was driving on a back street in Fargo, North Dakota. My wife and I had recently moved there. A car whizzed through the intersection about one hundred feet ahead of me, traveling from right to left.

When I reached the intersection, I was shocked. There were no traffic signs. I was free to zip through Fargo’s intersections, but I wasn’t free to feel safe.

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 rotational speed or orbital path. Water doesn't freeze at 32 degrees today and 80 degrees tomorrow.

God's spiritual laws describe how to love Him and your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37–39). They all reduce to that.

Natural laws undergird harmony in the universe. Similarly, the law of love underlies harmony in relationships. 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 doing what is best for the whole. If your fingers hold a cigarette and your lungs inhale the smoke, your whole body suffers the consequences. The ruling principle underlying real freedom is love.

You're free when you can love God with all your being and your neighbor as yourself. Unfortunately, selfishness often disrupts harmony.

Like a spider, selfishness crawls into every corner and crevice of human relationships. You crush it by repeatedly choosing, for the long haul, to do what is best for God and others.

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 backstitches, 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 can make your life miserable.

Good habits empower you and help you function effectively. The challenge is to replace the running stitches of unhealthy habits with the backstitches of good habits.

Over the last forty years, I've replaced ineffective oral-hygiene habits with better ones. For example, I now use an electric toothbrush twice a day.

I've also replaced criticizing others' unhealthy habits with greater tolerance. Now I have only about 147 unhealthy habits left to work on!

It's best to pull out and replace running stitches as soon as possible. You can pull young habits, like young oaks, with a gentle yank.

Over time, habits and oaks take deeper root and resist removal. As habits are forming, you're wise to evaluate whether to 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 have the right to burp, pick your nose, and frequently say “Ah” while speaking in public. But those habits do not benefit your communication!

Evaluate the stitches of your habits. Just as pouring water into a glass displaces the air, pouring good habits into your life helps displace the bad ones.

Identify at least one unhealthy habit and begin developing a good habit to replace it.

Read Luke 14.

59 Are You Content?

A bathroom-remodeling commercial showed a “before” (the old shower) and an “after” (the new shower). The “before” would have been a significant upgrade to my shower.

Somehow, mine 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 widespread, costly discontentment. Commercials nurture it. They’re the peanut butter that baits the mousetrap of credit card debt.

The average household debt in the USA is \$5,700. Those ages 45–54 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 and good enough. Contented people can feel good driving a 12-year-old car—better than discontented people 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 because Jesus Christ was his trusted resource. Christ provided everything Paul needed to accomplish what God wanted him to do (Philippians 4:11–13).

Contentment with food and clothing, combined with godliness, is a path to true wealth (1 Timothy 6:6, 8). You can be content because God is always with you and will never forsake you (Hebrews 13:5).

Contentment with what you have unlocks the door of the “love of money” prison. Learning contentment helps you avoid unnecessary debt or escape it. 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

Bearing Spiritual Fruit

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 woodland soil. My cheeks bulged like a chipmunk's. I don't remember swallowing the stuff.

I've never forgotten its taste—or the taste of the soap afterward! I hope I didn't ruin your dinner!

You're incredibly well-organized dust. For a change, science and Scripture agree on that (Genesis 2:7). Your composition 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 even 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. In the Old Testament, He gave specific directions for purifying people and their lips, garments, altars, houses, land, and the temple.

The Old Testament repeatedly refers to purification, often describing actions people were commanded to take.

The New Testament also describes God's work of purification. One example 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).

Another describes God's purpose in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection: "... 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 organized dirt. But like a pure white flower, five-star good things can grow from the dirt after you receive Jesus as your Lord and Savior! He wants to use your purified dirt to produce a lot of 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 the birds' seeds. They refused to give up.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. 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 could use gray-squirrel persistence and the quiet confidence that 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 with others to make your vision a reality. You will accomplish the most when you collaborate with God and other believers. With their assistance, you can fulfill God's purpose for your life.

Your quiet confidence should be anchored 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 become 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 died by 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 write the story of your accomplishments in disappearing ink. It's like a psalm I wrote on a four-by-six card. Sunlight bleached it and rendered it unreadable fifteen months later. Time will eventually erase memories of what you've done, just as the sun erased 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 what is eternal—other people. Instead of selfishly trying to carve your accomplishments on stone monuments, 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 and said, “Selcher in for Brown.”

I usually entered the game when Brown was in foul trouble. Henry Brown earned third-team all-state honors in Pennsylvania as a senior basketball player. For many years, he 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 that pleasure is not an adequate substitute for purpose. Pleasure isn’t bad in itself, but it must be tied to the right dock.

Adrift and pursued for its own sake, pleasure promises more than it can deliver. Eventually, it disappoints.

It leaves you empty and unfulfilled. Like a soap bubble, pleasure bursts when you grasp it, betraying your trust that it can make you happy.

The strange thing is how slowly you learn the lesson. You're naturally among those who are "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" (2 Timothy 3:4). That misplaced love chokes spiritual fruitfulness (Luke 8:14).

Pleasure pursued for its own sake leaves nothing substantial behind. Like a drug addict, you pursue it all over again today even though it disappointed you yesterday and the day before.

I'm reminding you of pleasure's proper place. King Solomon described it. In Ecclesiastes, he concluded 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 a 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). That joy comes naturally when you stay connected to the vine (John 15:5).

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

64 Have I Done Enough?

Alex Honnold free-climbed the Freerider route on El Capitan without a rope or safety gear on June 3, 2017. No one else has ever done it. It's one of the greatest athletic achievements of all time.

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 a sudden stop! [Honnold said](#)

Alex may have done enough, but you haven’t. “I’ve arrived!” is the mortal enemy of personal growth. Good is often Great’s strongest competitor.

Your biggest failures may be 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. Christ ... 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 warns against complacency. Three passages that explicitly mention it associate complacency with a false sense of security (Isaiah 32:9, 11; Amos 6:1).

Self-satisfied people aren’t secure. God expects a return on His investment in you (Matthew 25:14–30). You’re saved for good works, not by 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 pursue bearing fruit, you're missing your purpose! Speaking of fruit, here's the cost per pound of 28 fruits in the United States: watermelon (\$0.32), cantaloupe (\$0.52), and bananas (\$0.55).

Pineapple (\$0.65), honeydew (\$0.83), grapefruit (\$1.01), oranges (\$1.10), papaya (\$1.29), mangoes (\$1.32), tangerines (\$1.48), pears (\$1.52), and apples (\$1.62).

Peaches (\$1.68), nectarines (\$1.88), plums (\$1.99), pomegranates (\$2.08), kiwi (\$2.18), grapes (\$2.24), strawberries (\$2.51), apricots (\$3.09), and cherries (\$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).¹

My interest in fruit comes naturally. My father's ancestors raised wine grapes commercially in the nineteenth century. They lived in present-day Serbia and then near Middletown, Pennsylvania, in the early twentieth century.

Producing quality grapes is a divine-human partnership. The farmer invests time, energy, and money. But if God doesn't make the grapes grow, it's all for nothing. Spiritual fruit also comes at 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 bearing 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 stop 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 with all the energy God provides to fulfill His purpose for your life (Colossians 1:29). Given the price God paid for you, can you justify doing less?

What did God pay to redeem 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 interest-free.

I was grateful for her generosity and repaid her within six months. I recently saw a 1972 Squareback advertised on the internet—"It runs

great!”—for ten times what I paid. Incidentally, mine didn’t run great 46 years ago!

In the spiritual realm, God paid the Mount Everest-sized debt of sin you’ve incurred by living a self-centered life in a God-centered universe.

The penalty for such rebellious foolishness is death (Romans 6:23). Jesus paid that penalty 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 by loving God with all your being and loving your neighbor as yourself.

By God’s grace through faith, you become God’s child (John 1:12). He expects you to be an apple that doesn’t fall far from the tree.

That wasn’t 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 Father’s Day gift—you can give God is to love others as you love yourself. Make the family resemblance obvious! May everyone know which Vine you’re connected to!

What will you give today to demonstrate the family resemblance?

Read Luke 22.

67 The Worst Sin

The Golden Raspberry Award Foundation gives an award for the worst movie of the year. For about 20 years, it also awarded the worst original song of the year.

The Worst Sin Award (made up!) goes to the worst sin. And the winner is ...

Before announcing the winner, consider the nominees. Billy Graham thought the worst sin was persistently rejecting God's offer of forgiveness made available through 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, worshiping false gods, legal corruption, same-sex activity, lying, and social injustice.

I'm suggesting an additional nominee: influencing others to practice the previously mentioned sins. Leading others into sin can multiply its destructive effects.

The LORD condemned Baasha, king of Israel, for following Jeroboam's sins and causing the Israelites to sin (1 Kings 16:2). The Old Testament repeatedly condemns “the sins of Jeroboam.”

The people followed Baasha, who followed 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).

Leading others away from God and His ways is an especially serious sin. By contrast, one of the highest virtues is influencing others to follow Jesus. That's what branches remaining in the Vine do!

How are you demonstrating this 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 exists eternally as three co-equal Persons in fellowship: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God, but He is not the Father or the Son.

The Holy Spirit was involved with the Father and the Son in creating the physical world (Genesis 1:1–2). He was active in Jesus' conception (Matthew 1:18) and baptism (Matthew 3:16).

He was present at Jesus' temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1) and empowered His public ministry (Luke 4:18). Jesus carried out His earthly ministry in the Spirit's power.

The Holy Spirit brings about the new birth (John 3:5–8). The Father sent Him to guide and strengthen you. He comforts you and remains with you forever (John 14:16).

He's the Spirit of truth (John 14:17; 15:26). He guides you into truth (John 16:13). He testifies about Christ (John 15:26) and 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 of their sin and their need for a Savior. No one possesses the perfect righteousness a holy God requires. God's solution is faith in Jesus—His death, burial, and resurrection.

Through Christ, God provides the righteousness you lack and delivers you from condemnation. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).

If you belong to Christ, you have the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9). Being led by God's Spirit demonstrates that 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 people apart for His work (Acts 13:2). He guides them in it (Acts 16:6–7). He empowers you to be Christ's witness (Acts 1:8). He helps you pray, interceding for you with groans that words cannot express (Romans 8:26–27).

He gives spiritual gifts to believers (1 Corinthians 12:1–11). He inspired those who wrote Scripture (2 Peter 1:21), and He helps you understand it.

When He controls you, you display Christlike character: 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 driving 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. Living in the Spirit means allowing the Holy Spirit to empower you to live for Jesus and become more like Him.

That requires denying your pride, selfishness, and ambition and yielding 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 a desire to see others come to know Jesus.

When you’re living in the Spirit, you fulfill the righteous requirement 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 truth (3 John 4). The Spirit empowers your witness (Acts 1:8).

Three responses help you live under the Spirit's control. First, desire His control. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled (Matthew 5:6).

Second, confess any sins the Holy Spirit reveals. When you do, God promises to forgive and purify you (1 John 1:9).

Third, trust God to fill and empower you. Without faith, you can't please God (Hebrews 11:6). God's will is for you to be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). When you ask according to His will, He hears you (1 John 5:14–15).

You can express that trust in a prayer like this:

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

Are you 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 with one another. 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 should those branches relate to one another?

Collaborating with other believers to further God's Kingdom brings both joy and pain. The Apostle John focuses on the joy of fellowship in 1 John 1:3–4.

Sometimes, however, fellowship brings pain. We let each other down. When we get close, we sometimes poke each other with our porcupine quills.

God shapes us as we learn to 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, the "one another" and "each other" passages 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 in love. 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 humbly in love (Galatians 5:13). Don't become conceited. Don't provoke or 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, and songs from the Spirit (Ephesians 5:19).

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21). Do not lie (Colossians 3:9). Bear with each other and forgive one another (Colossians 3:13).

Teach and admonish one another with all wisdom (Colossians 3:16). Encourage and build each other up (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

Live in peace with each other (1 Thessalonians 5:13). Always strive to do what is good for each other (1 Thessalonians 5:15).

Encourage one another daily (Hebrews 3:13). Spur one another on toward love and good deeds, and 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 and 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 designed the church to nurture, 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 is Christlike and remove what isn't.

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

Chapter 8

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 lies as half-truths and 90-percent truths.

Daily, you swallow them. Few are obvious. Not everything you fervently believe is true.

Truth no longer has to correspond 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 people's 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.

You must give an account to Him (Hebrews 4:13). No one will tell Him that truth is relative! Truth is the basis for His judgments (Romans 2:2).

Speaking the truth about God's ways requires you not to be swayed by what others think (Matthew 22:16). Truth came to earth through Jesus Christ (John 1:17).

When you live in it, you have 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 this group lighting project.

The volume of virtuous deeds 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 grow weary of doing good.

New believers join the congregation. Believers transfer to the church from other churches. Generation after generation, the church must replace those who minister to others.

New lights are continually blinking on. These new believers must change how 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?" The key question is, "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 ministries 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 unpaved streets in the late 19th century to reduce dust. Falling off the wagon means returning to drinking alcohol after drinking water.¹

You face the danger of “falling off the wagon.” It includes going off a diet that helped you lose weight, quitting an exercise program that improved your health, returning to a habit you had kicked, and much more.

Like the pull of a magnet on a nail, the attraction of harmful long-term behavior that provides 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 still 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. But they had forgotten the hardships of bondage.

Jesus’ followers face the same “returning to Egypt” temptation. They easily forget the oppressive chains that once confined them. They don’t recall the depths of misery from which God delivered them. Their 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 profess 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). What you see impacts your feelings (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. Whoever and whatever wants to enter can. That won't end well.

Wise choices are like doors that determine what enters your life and what doesn't. The foolish view everything that's viewable. They never avert their eyes.

Failing to control what enters through the eye-gate pollutes the springs of your heart. This certainly applies to pornography in all its forms. If failing to look away when you should always produced severe chest pains, you'd do a better job of protecting your eyes and heart. So would I.

You need 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). He gives you the ability to see spiritual realities (Ephesians 1:18). His 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 so you can 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 can 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 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, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” and according to Romans 6:23, “the wages of sin is death.”

Imagine wearing glasses that distort everything. Airplanes look like bluebirds and vice versa. Trees look like weeds, and weeds look like mature oaks.

Black is white, and white is black. Girls look like guys, and guys look 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 18th-century Enlightenment are like glasses that have influenced people to believe that everyone is good. People supposedly have within themselves the resources to live moral lives, 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 also arose during the Enlightenment. Supposedly, 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 do 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” (Matthew 7:12 NIV).³

But these 18th-century ideas got it exactly backward! Religions are most alike on the surface. Imagine ten department-store Santa Clauses standing 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 interpreting the world.⁴ Religions aren’t the same, and they don’t claim to be.

Religions aren’t “take your choice” belief systems that lead to heaven by different routes. They often contradict one another.

For example, Judaism rejects Jesus as the Messiah; Christianity affirms Him as the Messiah. Both claims can’t be true. When contradictory beliefs collide, tolerance can respect people, but it can’t make both beliefs true.

How does that align with or differ from your understanding of the Christian faith? When tolerance and truth appear to conflict, which is 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 world’s largest religion, with Islam, the second largest.

Muslims don't believe that humans are inherently sinful or that sin destroys their 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 teach that Jesus didn't bear the world's sins or die on the cross and that every person must bear responsibility for his or her own sins. In 1 Corinthians 15:3–4, Paul wrote that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and was raised on the third day.

Muslims teach that almost everyone will spend at least some time in hell and perhaps all eternity. The hopes for escaping it include Allah's will, the intercession of Muhammad and saintly Muslims, and one's good deeds.²

According to 1 Timothy 2:3–5, God wants people to be saved. One person "goes to bat" for us before God. That person is Christ Jesus.

According to Ephesians 2:8–9, salvation is by God's grace received through faith. It's not the result of works, so no one has any room to boast.

Let's compare Islam and Christianity:

Islam: The Bible is corrupted and untrustworthy.

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

Islam: There is no assurance of salvation.

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

Islam: People can't be sure they're forgiven.

Christianity: If we confess our sins, God faithfully and justly forgives us (1 John 1:9).

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

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

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. No other religion supplies what He accomplished on the cross.

“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 worshiped Him as God.¹

Jesus lifts crushing guilt from fragile human shoulders. He gives you strength to conquer the passions and desires that control you like the wind turns a weathervane.

He supplies 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 like Jesus. None has a God who personally paid the price to set His people free. No other offers forgiveness 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 where he served as an expert witness, he was asked about his qualifications. He replied, "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 what 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 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 people because they are Methodist, Hindu, or Buddhist. Salvation comes through God's unmerited forgiveness, received by 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 build a three-thousand-mile, four-lane concrete highway with a single wheelbarrow of cement mix.

That's the fatal flaw of most religions. You don't have enough building materials. Only the good things you've done for the right reasons count, and even those aren't enough.

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 with one step of faith. 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 isn't 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 your total inability to meet God's requirements for right living. It's humbling to accept His unmerited forgiveness. The stubborn fact is that trust in Christ's substitutionary death, burial, and resurrection—and 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 the apples every October and stored them 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 preserve all the fruit we picked.

Not all the fruit of your life lasts. I want mine to last. I'm guessing you want yours to last too.

Fruit comes in two varieties—the fruit of light and the fruit of darkness (Ephesians 5:9, 11). The first endures. The second doesn't.

Making a name for yourself rots in the garage. So do material possessions and earthly power. But your spiritual 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 light that attracts and influences others generation after generation?

By the Holy Spirit's power, the fruit of light is Christlike 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 shining in the cave of the world's darkness (Matthew 7:15–20).

Some try to extinguish it. But it attracts others. It influences them to follow Jesus as you translate His character 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 grows as you please the Lord by doing the good works He sets before you and getting 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 attitudes, 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

God Heals 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 look intelligent and professional.

Employers are more likely to hire them. They're viewed as more trustworthy and friendly than those with uncorrected 20/20 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 others' view of me!

Spiritual glasses will help you 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 naturally base your choices on what's best for you, not what's best for God and others. You can't clearly see how God wants you to live.

God's corrective lenses enable you to see what's important in life—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 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 half-inch-long white hairs under my right jawbone. I had unknowingly missed them while shaving.

In 2015, my dermatologist found a life-threatening melanoma on my left cheek. Months earlier, a lady at my church had suggested I get that mole checked.

I didn't think for a moment that it was a serious problem. I was shocked when the dermatologist announced the diagnosis.

You don't always see yourself as you are. You see what you want to see. You choose what to believe. Your mirror doesn't lie. You do.

You lie to yourself when you live as though God doesn't exist. You lie to yourself by pursuing 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). If my daughter and dermatologist hadn't told me the truth, I would still be self-deceived. Without listening to God, you will too.

Take a risk and speak the truth in love to someone this week. Be receptive when someone does the same for 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 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 had always been there. We just hadn't noticed 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—what you want to see.

Competing political parties can interpret the same information in opposite ways to support their purposes.

Seeing only what you want to see carries significant negative consequences in the spiritual realm. Spiritual sight involves a choice.

Not everyone sees God's eternal power and divine nature evident in creation. Some fail to see because they want to hide their sinful 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 lack of love for others is a sure sign that religious people can't see (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 you decided to follow Jesus?

Read John 15.

84 Your Assumptions Can Be Your Worst Enemy

I fell flat on my back 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 directed 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 rejected 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 blocking me from responding.

I challenged him to read the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ in *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* written by Josh McDowell. He refused.

That has been the predictable response of atheists whom I've challenged in this way. They assume such evidence doesn't exist and refuse to consider it.

You often slip by drawing conclusions based on unexamined assumptions. Atheists don't prove that Christianity and Christian testimonies are delusions. They assume it.

They assume we live in a closed system of cause and effect in which no supernatural being can intervene. They think they can explain the world as it is without the actions of a superior being.

Even if that were so, it wouldn't prove that God doesn't exist. They can't imagine God visiting us in Jesus Christ. They've already assumed it can't happen.

They don't prove that there is no God or that miracles can't happen. They assume it. They take refuge in their ignorance.

They refuse to use their eyes to see and their 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 concluded that there's no God. They've assumed it. They build their thinking on four assumptions.

They assume 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 don't. Those contrasting assumptions lead in 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 or athletic ability.

It affects you more than your place in society. Your assumptions lead you to focus either on yourself or on God and others.

Unbelievers imagine that human will is unlimited. That is not true. Coaching track and field for more than twenty-five years has taught me the limits of human ability.

Fully 100 percent of those I've coached haven't had the hereditary gifts necessary to make the United States 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 that 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" and "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 the weather is sunny for the picnic.

It's easy when you're promoted, or your grandkids visit. By contrast, you need four-wheel-drive thanksgiving when God seems AWOL or deaf.

It takes you places two-wheel-drive thanksgiving can't. Spiritually healthy believers are thankful despite adversity, pain, and suffering. Such thanksgiving demonstrates trust in the God who works all things together for good (Romans 8:28).

How much does it take to stop you from giving thanks to God? For me, it's disappointingly little. I don't gush with 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 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 rather than on 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 gain a better grasp of spiritual truth. As you see God working 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 may 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 have 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 the One who never lies sets you free to become more like Him. An all-powerful God watches over you.

He loves you and covers you with His feathers. You find refuge under His wings (Psalm 91). He goes 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. 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 peppered class members with questions at random.

You prayed she wouldn't 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 along the path of obedience despite fear. Doing that today makes it slightly easier to do tomorrow. But it's never easy.

If fear of people 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 pronouncing your life “Well done” is worth enduring tons 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 with medicine but with a form of prayer. She believed prayer corrects the beliefs responsible for the illusion of ill health.¹

She erred greatly. My aunt believed her. She died from the “illusion” of cancer. The truth matters. Truth excludes falsehood and mere appearance. The New Testament concept of truth includes faithfulness and trustworthiness.

Jesus reveals life as it is and as it 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 both 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 standard and source of truth. He enables you to be a person of 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 have no clue that God could change that. Ouch! That failure characterizes my own life at times.

I’ve been more concerned with what they think of me than with what they think of Jesus’ offer of forgiveness, freedom, and purpose. Have you?

Telling the truth with gentleness and respect can be a turning point in their lives (1 Peter 3:15). It can also be risky.

When Jesus told the truth, some people became believers. Others became angry. You can expect the same.

I saw a Peanuts comic strip. The students wrote essays on the first day of the new school year. 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 the temptation.

A woman in my church made food and gave some to another woman in the church. She later asked her, “How was the such-and-such?”

She replied, “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.

Not speaking when you should and lying can temporarily smooth relationships, but at a great long-term cost.

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

Chapter 10

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 to the pastor's family. Among the items was a faded box of Jell-O with an expiration date of 1972!

Jell-O and other foods can sometimes be consumed safely after their expiration dates. But I'm guessing a pinch of that Jell-O could have dropped a seven-ton elephant in its tracks!

Your life on earth has an absolute expiration date. It isn't stamped under your left armpit or right foot. Doctors sometimes estimate it for patients with terminal conditions.

Based on my present age, experts predict I'll live 84.73 years 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 him, even though he was 102 years

old. He was right. His death was a painful reminder that life has an expiration date.

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 an unimaginably long life! Yes, your physical body will wear out and blow a gasket somewhere. But the real you will continue to live forever by believing in Jesus.

Trusting in His sacrificial death in your place gives you eternal life (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 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 eighteen, I registered for the draft. I’m a registered voter. My county has summoned me three times for jury duty.

I’m a Christian too. I wasn’t born one (no one is), but I was born again and became 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 the 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 trust God's promise that Jesus' death 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 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, assures me that I'm His child (Romans 8:16).

The Bible knows nothing about a trust that makes me right with God but doesn't also make me a more loving person (James 2:26).

Since I received Jesus into my life, I've become more obedient, which demonstrates my love for 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 feelings of guilt no longer weigh me down.

I enjoy being with other believers. I enjoy helping others. I want others to know Jesus too.

*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 feel like doing anything determines much of what you accomplish in life. Most people don’t want to go to work on Monday morning. But they go anyway!

Circumstances are like a string controlling the yo-yo of your feelings. When life is going well, you feel on top of the world. When it isn’t, 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 a Christian. There’s a better way.

Trust the facts—God’s character and promises—not whether you feel like you’re a Christian. Faith believes and acts on God’s promises. Such trust produces the stability of knowing you have eternal life now (1 John 5:11–13).

That assurance 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 He will think about it. He says He will.

You are a Christian. Whether you feel like Jesus is in your life isn’t relevant. Your feelings aren’t dependable, but God’s promises are. You can trust them because Jesus is the truth (John 14:6), 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 lives within you. Without faith, 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 will hold your weight when you're bold enough to step out on them.

How has trusting 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 advancing age sucked the humor right out of it!

Medical alert equipment helps countless senior citizens. Monitoring services cost about \$500 per year.

Dialing 911 is another push-button rescue strategy. People in the United States make about 240 million 911 calls each year. I'm guessing you've done it at least once. A follow-up ambulance ride can cost \$500 or more.

"Help! I've fallen, and I can't get up!" acknowledges your 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 weighted jacket, prevent you from getting up. 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 price of rescue. Only Jesus can.

He paid more than you can imagine to forgive you freely—with no \$500-plus ambulance or monitoring fee.

A crying-out-for-rescue attitude turns 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 says it is (John 3:18). Jesus gives you peace as you trust Him (John 16:33).

How did acknowledging your spiritual 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. You influence others more than you realize.

My grandfather died in 1939. I never met him, yet he influenced me. I keep my promises no matter what they cost me. My grandfather taught that value to my father, who taught it to me. It'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 by marriage.

It became mine because, when he died, none of his immediate family wanted anything that had belonged to him. I suspect 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 couldn't sit for a week! I suspect the same principle applies to you!

Most moral problems result from placing yourself rather than God at the center of your life. God isn't the defining passion of most professing Christians.

Too many churchgoing folks are apathetic and uncommitted because they've never really repented. They came to Jesus "just as I am" and never changed.

Repentance includes a change in attitude and behavior. It involves a commitment to five basics that enable you to bless others: believing in prayer, being filled with the Holy Spirit, knowing the Word of God, obeying God daily, 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 not 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 reflect well on how closely professing Christians follow Jesus.

Understand Jesus' words in Luke 9:23 about His followers denying themselves and carrying their crosses. Your cross includes 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](#). It helps you assess whether you are growing spiritually.

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 choose 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 review when Jesus evaluates your life.

The assessment examines how well your everyday behavior aligns with Jesus' values and actions. 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/how-to-know-you-are-growing-spiritually>.

Focus on improving one or two areas with the lowest scores. The [How to Become More Like Jesus](#) resource provides specific suggestions.

These two resources can help you take 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 need improvement? 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 the penalty of sin. The Holy Spirit leads you in the fight to put to death your God-offending habits and behaviors (Romans 8:13–14). As He does, 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 goes beyond agreeing with the historical facts about

Jesus. It means trusting His death, burial, and resurrection rather than your good works to make you 100% acceptable to God. It's not belief plus good works that makes 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 becomes easier.

Another vital sign is loving other believers (1 John 3:14). Its defining characteristic is blessing others through self-sacrificial giving. 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). As His child, you do too when you follow your made-in-heaven internal moral compass.

Other signs of Jesus' life in you include desiring to read and act on the Bible's instructions (2 Timothy 3:16–17), forgiving those who have offended you (Matthew 6:15), praying regularly (1 Thessalonians 5:17), experiencing 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? Which are least obvious?
Read Acts 7.*

97 What You See Is What Others Get

What you see in the mirror is what others get. What you see significantly colors how others see 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 sense of purpose.

This principle was at work when the spies of Israel reported on their exploration of the Promised Land. Ten spies saw multitudes of intimidating giants.

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, social status, or physical appearance is like a sandcastle on the beach. The rising tide of adversity, aging, and life’s kicks and punches will eventually undermine it. God provides more security than any do-it-yourself foundation can give.

“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 the ultimate price to redeem you: Jesus. That gives you a worth that will never be marked down. 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. We cheered for Maximum Security on May 4, 2019. We thought he had a chance to win the Triple Crown. Watching him cross the finish line first made us happy.

Then another horse's owner challenged the victory. Video replays revealed that the previously undefeated horse had veered into the path of other horses, disrupting their momentum. We were disappointed when race officials overturned his victory.

Race officials announced the decision to more than 150,000 people at Churchill Downs and millions watching on television. Maximum Security, however, wasn't disappointed.

He had crossed the finish line first. He knew that. He was there. He didn't care what television newscasters said, or newspaper journalists wrote about his race. He had no sense that he had interfered with other horses, even though he had. In his mind, 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 you fall short of God's moral perfection apart from faith in Christ. You also underestimate how righteous your standing is by grace through faith in Christ.

On the 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 to face reality with maximum security!

Why must your spiritual security depend on faith rather than feelings?

Read Acts 9.

Chapter 11

Peace in Jesus

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 may be zipping along, but you're not headed anywhere significant. To fulfill God's purpose, you must overcome substantial opposition.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus faced the hurricane winds of His impending crucifixion. He prayed, "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 your fears. Otherwise, you may never even attempt to 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. Parents instruct their children not to touch a hot stove burner or cross the street without looking both ways.

Reasonable fears prevent bodily injury. My car's dashboard has more than twenty warning lights. Fear emerges when one lights up!

The healthiest fear of all is the fear of God. Such fear is awe-inspired reverence for Him that results 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. Such worry harms you physically and emotionally now.

Unhealthy fears can make you sick, shorten your life, and torment you endlessly. When I leave the kitchen, my fear of the red-hot burner dissolves.

However, an unhealthy fear of failure can drive me mercilessly. Like an insane cowboy, it rides my back 24/7.

Unhealthy fear is God's warning signal that you need to replace the object of your trust. "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. As you know Him better, trusting Him becomes easier. Trust in God displaces unhealthy fear. Either trust in God or unhealthy fear can fill your life, but not both simultaneously.

What unhealthy fears has 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 2019 measles outbreak in the United States.

Measles is highly contagious and can cause serious physical problems, including death. The same is true of COVID-19.

My parents encouraged my brothers and me to share. Full disclosure—we shared our diseases better than our toys.

When one brother got measles or chickenpox, inevitably, we all did. That was before vaccines.

More than diseases are contagious. In instructions to Israel about 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 to their parents to see how they react to situations. If a parent projects fear, children quickly join in.

Your fear can spread like panic in a movie theater when someone yells, “Fire!” God told Joshua, the commander of Israel’s army, four times in Joshua 1 to be strong and courageous. He would set the pace.

Faith is an “I’ve got this through Christ who strengthens me” attitude (Philippians 4:13). Such trust is contagious.

I saw this 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 witness despite my fear.

Fear and faith are both contagious. What will you pass on?

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

Read Acts 12.

102 Anger Bone Connected to the Fear Bone

A man once turned left without paying attention to oncoming traffic. I couldn't avoid hitting his car. Fear turned to anger in a nanosecond.

My automatic response before I hit the car was "You jerk!" I hurled the words with one hundred megatons of venom. My rage exploded.

But it subsided quickly enough for civility when I talked to him. Fear often pushes my anger button before my emotional self-control button engages.

I'm not very successful at controlling that kind of anger. It's a blip on the behavioral radar screen that usually disappears quickly.

A significant amount of anger in America is the perpetual, simmering kind. Students are angry about school shootings. They fear one 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 presidential candidate.¹ They feared what that candidate's agenda would be.

How much of 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 did 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 connection among anger, fear, and faith help you understand yourself and others? Read Acts 13.

103 How Can You Dial Down Anger?

Angry outbursts are a growing epidemic in the United States. They spread like superbug bacterial infections.

You see them in politics. In mass shootings. On the highways. In churches. In homes. In the mirror.

Like gasoline fumes, your anger can ignite almost instantly. The match might be fear, inconvenience, or someone disagreeing with you.

Left unattended, anger 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 can produce depression. Turned outward, it scorches enemies and loved ones alike.

Like a mind-altering drug, anger 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 spreads like the flu. Those slow to anger 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).

Provoking angry people is like beating 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 steps can you take to reduce your angry outbursts? Read Acts 14.

104 Border Security

Walls have a place. God designed your skin as “border security.” It protects you from harmful ultraviolet rays, bacteria, and viruses.

You treat wounds with an antibiotic and cover them with a suitable bandage. You don't put a huge bandage on a paper cut or a small one on a two-inch surgical wound. You evaluate the size of the threat and respond accordingly.

Security is never total. There's a way around every wall. You still get the flu and colds despite your skin's best border-security efforts. You can inoculate yourself by touching your nose, eyes, or 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 the doors at my house. But that won't stop someone determined to harm us. I don't worry about it. I do what I can and trust God with the rest.

You can purchase security devices with quarters. "In God We Trust" appears on every quarter in small print.

Trust in God is a border wall that brings security and peace no device can provide. "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 trusting God brought you peace during the past week?

Read Acts 15.

105 Crippling Anxiety

Anxiety isn't always terrible. Without emotional tension, life would be boring—like watching grass grow or paint dry. A dash of anxiety can make watching your favorite team play more enjoyable because you don't know who will win.

Like salt in your food, a little anxiety can be good. But too much can harm you. Crippling anxiety can contribute to headaches and other physical problems.

It wears down your body without accomplishing anything positive. It reduces your ability to think clearly, distracts your prayers, and restricts your ability to worship God.

So how do you reduce crippling anxiety? As surely as exercise increases strength, love reduces fear. “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 by displacing it with water. Likewise, you can displace fear 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 care for you isn’t like instant coffee—add hot water and stir. Trust grows over time. God’s Word, the work of the Holy Spirit, and other believers who model trust 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 cares for 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 more effectively.

Face your fears. Stand up to crippling anxiety. Walk toward what you fear, even though your heart is racing. You may discover that what you feared isn’t as intimidating as you imagined.

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—depends on doing what is right despite fear. President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. As of January 1, 1863, the legal status of enslaved African Americans in the Confederate states would change—from enslaved to free.

His action enraged the Confederate States of America. But it was the right thing to do. He is remembered as one of our greatest presidents.

A high point of President Ronald Reagan's presidency came on June 12, 1987, when he said, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

Advisors wanted to cut those words from the speech. They feared the backlash the words might create. Reagan courageously spoke them. The Berlin Wall came down on November 9, 1989.

When the Israelites returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon, they wanted to rebuild the altar. But they had to overcome their fear of the people around them to do it.

"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.

I'm often unlike Lincoln, Reagan, and the Israelites returning from captivity. I fail to follow through on my best ideas and intentions.

I sometimes lack the courage to turn them into reality. I fear what others might say or do if I fail.

Too often, I live in the perceived safety that knows neither defeat nor victory. I avoid the darts, arrows, and missiles of criticism that way. But 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 does fear hinder you from bearing more spiritual fruit? Read Acts 17.

Chapter 12

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 isn't based on your virtuous deeds.

But grace is much more. Salvation involves becoming whole and healthy—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 you and gives you 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, providing 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 overcomes your weaknesses (2 Corinthians 12:9). It takes the shape of your need, whatever it is, on 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 the tune of Amazing Grace. John Newton had no idea how popular his hymn would become.

Written in 1779, Amazing Grace is one of the most popular Christian hymns today. My hymn won't displace it anytime soon! Grace disturbs before it amazes. Before it lifts and frees, it convicts and stings. It shakes a proud, self-sufficient ego like a magnitude 9.5 earthquake.

Around 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!

Before you can stop at the divine service station and pray, "Fill it up with amazing grace," you must call the offender in Monday morning's mirror a wretch. That reality is disturbing.

The Magi wanted to worship the recently born King of the Jews. That disturbed both Herod and all Jerusalem (Matthew 2:3).

Grace disturbs before it amazes. I invite you to read—and even sing—the following hymn to the tune of *Amazing Grace*.

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; but that I couldn't see.

I soared to heights I'd never known; an 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 became amazing?

Read Acts 19.

109 Shape-Shifting Grace

I batted stones in my driveway for hours in my youth. 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 richer, better-looking, more athletic, more popular, healthier, stronger, more respected, thinner, smarter, or more socially adept?

You have significant limitations. We all do. You're like a caterpillar looking adoringly at fluttering butterflies. Your heroes reveal what you prize.

The good news is that if you want to be like Jesus, God's 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: "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 serve others humbly. Formerly dejected, downcast pessimists find light replacing their darkness.

Those who knew only strife, discord, and turmoil find peace. Those who complained about minor inconveniences learn to endure major

ones without complaining. People who once didn't care about others' needs willingly sacrifice for them.

Whatever it takes to transform you from a spiritual caterpillar into a spiritual butterfly, God's shape-shifting grace can accomplish. It provides whatever you need to become more like Jesus.

How does God's shape-shifting grace give you confidence to 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 when I unintentionally pulled the trigger of a loaded shotgun. Fortunately, I didn't hurt anyone, but thoughts of the harm I could have caused haunted me.

Unfortunately, I've also pulled the trigger with my mouth, firing words at others that inflicted painful wounds. Sometimes they've left permanent scars. You have too.

Perhaps you'd never shoot an animal. But humans are fair game. Sometimes you fire words carelessly; sometimes you do it intentionally.

Usually, the gunpowder of your anger sends the words on their way. Uplifting and disparaging words somehow flow from the same mouth. That's not Jesus' way for those who profess to follow Him (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 as carelessly as I fired the shotgun.

They're lightweight and small-caliber, but they have penetrating power far beyond their size.

They have no potential to do good. Sometimes they inflict pain. Keeping them to ourselves benefits everyone.

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 life (Deuteronomy 32:47), chosen 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 a mixed-breed mutt dream it's best in show at the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show.

You can think you are a loser if you're not the best at something. Self-loathing, more than pride, can be 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 that is inconsistent with a life shaped by Christ.

That's very challenging. A habit of 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 forming on a hot, humid day.

You can't stop your sinful nature from manufacturing critical bullets. But 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? You may do that because you don't feel good about yourself or your worth.

So, how do you calm your fears and insecurities? 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 rather than tearing them down (Ephesians 4:29).

Why is firing critical bullets much worse than having 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 kind of tree will germinate.

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 will germinate.

You can count the seeds you plant through kind words and actions. Perhaps you donate food to a 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. Others might produce full-size trees with staggeringly heavy crops year after year.

You can make more of a difference than you imagine when you sow seeds of kindness through your 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 can make an unimaginably enormous impact on Earth by sowing seeds of kindness through your words and actions every day. Read Acts 23.

113 Nurturing Early Bloomers

A Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association (PIAA) Class 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—Chance was a first-year student. Most boys his age play on the junior varsity. Chance starred on the varsity. He was a

gifted athlete who grew up in an environment that nurtured and developed his talent.

Early blooming requires a supportive environment. Daffodils next to the south side of our house blossom early. When the sun shines, the temperature there is 20 degrees warmer than on the north side. Heat from the house also warms the flowers.

Similarly, I use a specially designed electric heating pad to speed the germination of seeds I plant in our 55-degree basement. It shortens the germination 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 early blooming, help people identify their talents. Then help develop those talents by the irrigation of 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 laid 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 your working years prepares you for retirement. Exercising regularly, getting enough rest, and eating healthy foods add up to better health tomorrow.

Treat others well at this year's holiday gathering. It 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.

A conversation that smells like week-old fish carcasses in 90-degree heat threatens relational bridges. Obscene, lying, critical, angry, or boastful words burn relational connections as you speak.

Words can both build up 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 tried to give them away as free firewood (ashes to ashes!).

The destroyer was the emerald ash borer. It's a small, beautiful green beetle from Asia.

Experts predict they'll eventually kill all 308 million untreated 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!” sticks to the soul like epoxy. Such words are 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 are the best filter available. Controlling your anger prevents the launch of thermonuclear words with lifelong 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. That’s also a good idea for tomorrow! Read Acts 26.

116 Ten Thousand Miles per Gallon Words

He prayed for me after 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 would gush in the future. He didn’t know what that meant.

God showed me within five seconds. The picture described increased spiritual fruitfulness. At the time, I had no clue that would include internet ministry.

The man’s words left me speechless. Our lives touched for less than 60 seconds. I’d never met him before. I don’t know his name. I doubt I’ll see him again on earth. I wouldn’t recognize him if I did.

He left me to pray for someone else. If his wife asked him about the highlights of his day, I doubt he mentioned me. Yet his words have fueled my hope and energized me 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 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 in the plain brown paper of pain. Those gifts can 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! Some painful experiences happen because God loves you too much to let you stay just as you are.

From 2008 to 2018, I had two 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 that 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 sanding away what 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).

Young children would be content to live on candy. They don't know what they need to be healthy.

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 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, a different ministry direction, and increased spiritual fruitfulness have emerged in the wake of my pain.

Jesus learned obedience through what He suffered (Hebrews 5:8). Before you share His glory, you share His sufferings (Romans 8:17).

We can't compare those sufferings with the glory that God will reveal in us (Romans 8:18). Your pain can help others experience that same glory.

How does the truth that God allows us to hurt so we can 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 like lightning bolts from a cobalt-blue sky. There's no easy explanation.

On the one hand, there is the destructiveness of the world system, human sinfulness, and Satan. On the other hand, God is in control and works 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 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!

I hate suffering, but 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 obedience (Hebrews 5:8).

Joseph explained that his brothers intended to harm him, but God intended it for good—the saving of many lives (Genesis 50:20).

Saving lives and your holiness are 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 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. Nor is it thinking 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 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 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 prayer that I experienced early in my Christian life.

He's conforming you to the image of His Son—a person with persevering faith despite circumstances that suggest faith is foolish. Mother Teresa felt God was distant or hiding for much of her life. 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 and experiences constant pain. This isn't what we'd planned for her at all. But God wants us to trust Him.

Life often messes up your plans. 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

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 it and trust it. Faith is only as good as the trustworthiness of its object.

If you trust friends to repay a small loan but they don't, their 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—in God, who is trustworthy.

Actions demonstrate biblical faith. Robert Chesebrough believed in Vaseline, which he invented.

He injured himself repeatedly and applied it to demonstrate its healing properties. People could see his healed wounds and realize the value of Vaseline 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, many possess a “faith” that doesn’t affect 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 demonstrate their love for God by trusting 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 on 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? (See Galatians 5:6.) How will you know your faith is growing? Read Romans 3.

121 Why I Believe in the Resurrection

Without Jesus’ resurrection, Christianity would collapse. The church’s existence makes no sense apart from it. The church began only after His resurrection.

Beginning a religion based on a resurrected George Washington would be foolish. It could easily be disproved. Jesus' tomb was empty. No one could find His dead body.

Jesus' resurrection is why Sunday became 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 to the resurrection. Three are by eyewitnesses (Matthew, John, and Peter).

The Apostle Paul's references to the resurrection suggest it was already accepted as fact in the A.D. 50s and 60s. No evidence suggests these six writers made it all up.

The earliest explanation for the empty tomb was that Jesus' disciples stole the body. They would have gained absolutely nothing by inventing a resurrection story.

They lost their lives by sticking with it. People don't die for a lie they know is a lie.

The disciples firmly believed in the resurrection. It transformed them from cowardly hidiers into bold preachers.

The Jewish or Roman authorities didn't move Jesus' body. If they had, 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—it was 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. He encouraged His followers to believe in and preach His resurrection.

Jesus' followers claimed to see Him alive after His death. They didn't hallucinate. None of them expected Him to rise from the dead. Jesus had to convince them that He had risen.

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 witnessed Jesus stepping out of the tomb or because you 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 to the critic follows:

"[My belief in the resurrection] is based on the testimony of dependable witnesses, just as evidence is examined in our 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 accept only what my eyes have seen. Imagine how the coronavirus would spread if everyone behaved as usual until they met their first victim!

If I believed only what I have witnessed, I wouldn't accept that 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 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 for their martyrdom 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 scientifically that God exists or that the Christian faith is 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. Multiple tests must demonstrate that distilled water boils at 100 degrees Celsius at sea level. If someone else conducts 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 that I'm a fraternal twin who was born second.

Accurate historical accounts depend on the testimony 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). That an all-powerful God exists 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 a 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 them (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 approach science with atheistic assumptions. They assume they don't need God to explain why the universe exists. They reject the possibility of miracles.

They assume the universe is a closed system of cause and effect in which nothing can interfere. These assumptions are unprovable. They are as unprovable as recreating the Mona Lisa through unlimited 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 people 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 with each day corresponding 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." The meaning of "day" depends on how it is understood in Genesis ¹.

Was creation in 4004 BC, as Archbishop Ussher calculated based on the genealogies in Genesis? Not necessarily.

The Hebrew words translated as “father” and “son” don’t have fixed meanings. They can refer to distant ancestors and descendants, respectively.

That’s why we can’t use the genealogies in Genesis to calculate the passage 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. But many reject what science says about the beginning of 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 believed that what current science tells us about evolution produces at least three challenges for Bible-believing Christians.¹

First, believers who embrace evolution 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. Of course, this kind of gate has no hinges, and you won't eat 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, 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 that 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 concludes 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 old.

Do you believe in a young 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 God used evolution in creation without accepting the claim that natural selection eliminates any need for God to explain the world. That claim 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 treats Adam and Eve as historical figures (Romans 5:12ff).

Those who believe in the authority of the Bible must agree. 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, 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 evolution produced Adam and Eve, who were also the recipients of God's image.

Still others believe that God used evolution to develop life on earth but 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 figure of 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 hold our position humbly and tentatively. We must agree to disagree cordially with those who believe the Scriptures are authoritative but interpret them differently.

“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 teaching the truth (2 Timothy 3:16). It will last forever (Isaiah 40:8). It is living, active, penetrating, and able to judge the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Hebrews 4:12). It gives spiritual life to the spiritually dead (1 Peter 1:23).

Some think the Bible is merely a human book. After all, anyone could claim to speak for God. How do we know people did not simply make things up and write them down?

The Old Testament established a severe test to weed out impostors. If a “prophet’s” prediction did not come true, that person was to be put to death (Deuteronomy 18:20).

God worked through human writers to produce the best-selling book ever written. He moved the men who held the pens, communicating His truth through each writer's unique style and personality.

Do you think most people prefer to live under the authority of the Bible or decide for themselves how to live? Duh!

Could that be one reason people are so committed to undermining its authority? The Bible describes life as it really is. Human pride makes us think we see clearly when, in fact, we are spiritually blind.

Imagine feeling perfectly well when you go to the doctor for a checkup. You expect a good report, but you do not get one.

After detecting something suspicious, the doctor performs a biopsy and sends it to the lab. Seven days later, he calls and tells you that you have a life-threatening melanoma.

You must have it removed soon. Would it be wise to put more confidence in feeling well than in the doctor's diagnosis? God's Word, like a biopsy, reveals the spiritual cancer within us.

We naturally think our inner selves are "sugar and spice and everything nice." But God's Word describes the human heart as deceitful above all things and beyond cure (Jeremiah 17:9).

Is it wise to trust the feeling that everything is okay rather than the Doctor's diagnosis? Why? Read Romans 10.

128 Is the Bible Reliable? (2)

God isn't like a safe, nonjudgmental, all-loving grandfather. He is kind, but He isn't safe to trifle with.

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 is 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 feeling well than in the "Doctor's" diagnosis? An accurate understanding of God's nature, promises, and expectations is important.

The Old Testament has thirty-nine books. Moses wrote the first five more than 3,000 years ago. We don't know all the human authors.

God inspired and protected the writing of these books. He 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 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 about 45 years.

They wrote them on perishable materials. Therefore, we have only copies of copies.

Experts date the earliest surviving New Testament fragment to 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 an ancient writing. The shorter the time between the original and the oldest existing copy, the less chance there is 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, 900–1,400 years separate the originals from the oldest existing manuscripts. Only a few hundred years separate the originals from the oldest copies of the New Testament.

Rather than the usual 10–15 manuscripts of the 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 and unique book. Although about forty authors wrote it over 1,500 years, it tells one unified story.

The door between the two testaments is open. Genesis begins with the creation of the heavens and the earth. Revelation ends with the creation of the new heavens and the new earth.

In the New Testament, Christ fulfills the Old Testament roles of prophet, priest, and king. His crucifixion eliminated the need for the repeated sacrifices described in the Old Testament.

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

The Bible foretells the future. Christ fulfilled more than 350 Old Testament prophecies
(<http://www.bibleprobe.com/300great.htm>). <http://www.bibleprobe.com/300great.htm>

For example, He would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:1–6). God would raise Him from the grave (Psalm 16:10; Matthew 28:1–10).

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, He said that He didn't come to abolish the Law or the Prophets [the Old Testament] but to fulfill them. He said that the smallest letter or part of a letter wouldn't disappear from the Law until everything was fulfilled.

If Jesus is God, as He claimed, His view of the Scriptures is important. His identity rests on a historical event. He was 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 that He talked with them after He had risen from the dead (Acts 1:3). Were they all liars and fools? Tradition holds that enemies of the faith killed all of 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 a resurrection story and then sticking to it?

If Jesus rose from the dead and believed the Old Testament was God's Word, how does that influence your opinion of 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 he reverently trusted the Scriptures despite their difficulties because Christ trusted the Bible.¹

Time and further study often explain troublesome passages. Treat difficult biblical passages like a fish with bones.

Don't choke on them! Just pick the meat away from the bones! Someday the "bones" might be as nourishing as the rest. This principle—that I don't have to understand everything the Bible says right now—helps me deal with difficult passages.

Why couldn't former U.S. President Bill Clinton get away with claiming that he had a completely unblemished record? Many living people remember his moral failures.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke wrote their Gospels while witnesses of what Jesus said and did were still alive. That included those who were bitter enemies of the faith.

They certainly would have 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 and forgiving is better than retaliating. It emphasizes giving more than receiving. Living in harmony with its teaching produces deep 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, however, they’re overwhelmingly extraordinary. They rest on my dresser.

They 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 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.

I suggest, however, that you reflect on the 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 of how God has intervened in your life? Read Romans 14.

Chapter 14

Genuine Humility

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 came to that conclusion after a devotional reading of Exodus 10, which describes the locust plague, one of the ten plagues God brought on Egypt.

Throughout the account of the plagues, we repeatedly read 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 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 to conflict is too often pride-driven. But 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, a 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 an 180-degree turn from your natural, pride-driven desire to control your 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 lake bottom cut my fishing line, and 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 covered the lake bottom. The Great Lakes contain quadrillions of them—more than 9,000 per square foot in some 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 introduced them to the Great Lakes by releasing mussel-containing ballast water. They've spread by hitchhiking 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 notice their obvious "better than you" thinking and behavior.

That attitude contributed to the murder of about six million Jews because people imagined they were inferior. You saw the same sense of superiority in the 2019 college admissions scandal.

It's everywhere. 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 adversely affect the fulfillment of your God-given purpose? Read Romans 16.

134 Pursuing Glory

Pursuing personal glory is a distinctly human trait. Lions, tigers, and bears don't pursue it. They seek dominance, not glory.

Running hard after glory is a peculiarly human desire. 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. Honor and celebration don't satisfy me for long.

That 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 to get your next fix.

Typically, you accept glory from others but don't pursue glory from God (John 5:44). Beneath it all lie insecurity and the desire for others to love you as you are.

Jesus can help you manage this misdirected desire for glory. You're wise to 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 a fireworks display, it quickly fades away (1 Peter 1:24). Chasing 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 rather than 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 gymnastics routines. She

flawlessly performs moves beyond my dreams. No other female in history had even attempted some of those moves in competition.

She has won more world championship medals than any other gymnast, male or female. She's the greatest gymnast of all time.

Despite being only four feet eight inches, her accomplishments tower above those of all other female gymnasts. She dominates her sport as few athletes ever have.

If you were her, would it 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 may pale in comparison. She worked hard to stand alone in the gymnastics spotlight. The thought of what comes next can be 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 a 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 probably don't have the ability or determination to accomplish it.

Even if you did, you might 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 fulfilling 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). Having people worship, serve, and glorify 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 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-producing soil. He enriches that rock dust, using fungi and bacteria to break down dead vegetation. He uses the broken light of a rainbow to remind you of His covenant never again to destroy life on earth with a colossal flood (Genesis 9:13).

Gideon and his three hundred men followed God's plan and broke pitchers. He used the resulting light to cause their enemies to flee (Judges 7).

Jesus fed thousands of people, including women and children, with five 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 pieces of barley loaves were left 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 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 with themselves and their own interests.

He uses contrite, broken, weak vessels. He empowers them with His Spirit. He perfects His strength in their 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 with boldness seems unexpected.

It's like an Olympic swimmer who's afraid of water! An online resource even lists boldness as the opposite of humility.¹

You rarely pair humility with boldness because you may not understand biblical humility. Humility is the fluttering flag of freedom.

It's found in the gentle land where self-centeredness, pride, and self-belittling are aliens. Humility isn't criticizing or 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 lovingly 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 spoke the truth boldly during His ministry, even when His message offended the religious leaders of His day and made them want to arrest Him.

They recognized that 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 overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those 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 fruits of denying yourself (Luke 9:23). I need more of both. How about you?

How could greater humility and boldness help you bear much fruit that will remain? Read 1 Corinthians 4.

138 Draining the Pride Pan

I ran a 600-yard race at a junior high track meet. I reached the home stretch. Suddenly, I realized that only one runner was ahead of me.

I strained to pass him and did. My knees began to buckle with every stride. Somehow, I didn't fall. I maintained my slight lead and 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 the celebration of 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 toward that end. 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 anyone who threatens its total domination. It causes interpersonal conflict in spades.

Self-centered pride is a venomous species. It strikes anyone who interferes with its self-exaltation. It wants to be God. It lives in all of us.

Self-centered pride's drain plug is gratitude. Gratitude turns your focus away from yourself.

Be thankful in everything (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Such behavior recognizes a God-centered universe. Pointing 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

Forgetting God

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 plant in my garden plot produces significantly more than one in a grow bag.

On the other hand, consider grape tomatoes planted in grow bags on my concrete porch. They're far less disease-prone than those planted in my blight-spore-infested garden.

In 2019, those planted in the garden died by August 1. Those on the porch bore tomatoes into November. Where you plant seeds can make a significant difference.

In 2018, I planted grape tomato seeds in three-inch-diameter pots filled with potting soil. The soil was fertile but insufficient to feed a mature tomato plant.

I transplanted the seedlings into four twenty-inch-diameter grow bags filled with nutrient-rich compost, perlite, peat moss, and

fertilizer. I harvested about two thousand grape tomatoes from those four plants. Where your faith takes root matters.

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 three-inch-diameter pot of regular church attendance. You need the twenty-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 that 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 I plant illustrates a serious life lesson. It’s called “Green Ice.” One day, I noticed a piece missing from a lettuce leaf. Then I saw a half-inch-long worm eating it.

Left to chew 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, kill, and destroy (John 10:10 NIV).

I played my brother's track-and-field computer game for three consecutive hours in 1981. What's the problem? It was an 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 (there's no law against it). But I choose not to, lest it control 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. Every day, people text while driving, sometimes causing fatal crashes. Others kill themselves and 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 went from being a beloved pastor and teacher to facing 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 can feel like 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 both adverse and favorable circumstances to test and strengthen your faith.

It is for your benefit. He already knows the outcome.

A test of faith unfolds in Mark 4:35–41. Consider what happened before Jesus calmed a storm on the Sea of Galilee.

He told His disciples they were going to the other side (verse 35). On their way, a furious storm erupted around them.

Breaking monstrous waves began to fill their boat. The storm seemed to be in charge.

Jesus' disciples rebuked Him (verse 38). He didn't seem to care about the storm. To panicky people, those who trust God can appear apathetic.

Jesus' disciples forgot that 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 God works all things together for your good (Romans 8:28).

You don't remember that God didn't spare His own Son but delivered Him up for you. That assures you He will graciously give you everything you truly need (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 led to decision A, which led to decision B, and then C, etc.

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 become 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 eating breakfast.

Our kitchen TV isn't connected to cable. Reception depends on audio and video signals 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 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, there is no signal!

I’m assigned to pass on the life-giving gospel message to others who can pass it on to still 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 reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20 NIV). When fear keeps me from doing so, there is no signal!

God prompts me to 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 by morally and spiritually upside-down values.

You don't love God or 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 rained down His blessings on you, your upside-down cup would be 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 happens 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 and 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 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 like Him.

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), to 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 be His channel of 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 without potholes.

Instead, He comforts you amid 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 your work. 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). Sowing is your responsibility. 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 path 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.

Producing spiritual fruit is even more challenging than harvesting homegrown vegetables. The Parable of the Sower describes forces that oppose fruitfulness (Matthew 13:1–23).

In Matthew 13:18–23, Jesus explains the deeper meaning of the birds eating the seed sown along the path. The evil one snatches away God’s word sown in people’s 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 initially receive the word joyfully. But then they turn back from following Jesus. They go their own way because of 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 bearing fruit.

The world system 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 path.

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 signs of spiritual fruit in your life encourage you?

Read 1 Corinthians 12.

146 Your Homework

In prayer, my pastor referred to the beautiful sanctuary where we were worshiping that Sunday morning. The theme was “focus.” That got me thinking.

I thought about my house. During the pandemic, people in the United States spent considerable money making 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 of impressing others. Houses require upkeep, but that housework is not your homework.

I thought about church buildings. Sanctuaries in the United States commonly have stained-glass windows, beautiful pews, and impressive pulpits.

Contrary to popular opinion, the building where you worship isn’t God’s house. Its upkeep can diminish a congregation’s ability to minister to others.

As many as one in five churches were predicted to close permanently because of the realities of COVID-19.¹ A church building 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 throughout the world and across time. God uses these living stones to build a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:1–25). It's constructed on a chosen and precious living Cornerstone, Jesus Christ.

Beautifying that house is God's primary focus and should be yours as well. You do it by not conforming to your former evil desires. You make it more attractive by setting yourself apart for God and His purposes (1 Peter 1:14–15).

You make it more winsome when you sincerely love the other “stones” in that house (1 Peter 1:22).

You adorn it by rejecting malice, 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 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 heard it because 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 this 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 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 apply to you, right? At least, you function as if they don’t.

The message of multiple Old Testament prophets to the people of Israel (and to you) can be reduced to one word: Repent (Ezekiel 14:6). 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 can justly 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 broken bread represents the bruising, crushing, and wounding of Jesus for your sins (Isaiah 53:5). The cup reminds you that God justly forgives your sins because Jesus paid the death penalty they deserved (Hebrews 9:22).

In Jesus, you have all you need to overcome the downward pull of the world, the flesh, and the 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 who 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 for you to 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 the flickering coals of gratitude into flame. Jesus is still setting you free from all that keeps you from becoming like Him.

He's given you 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 that 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). Yet F. F. Bruce wrote, "The idea of an unbaptized Christian is simply not entertained in the New Testament."¹

Does salvation depend on baptism? Yes. Do you have to be baptized in water for God to save you? No.

The essential baptism 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 thief on the cross is the exception to the rule. The apostle Paul expected Christians to be baptized (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 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 the strength He provides.

Immersion was the usual mode of baptism in the early church. The Didache, an early Christian document, also permitted pouring when sufficient water wasn’t available.

The Didache gives this early instruction about baptism: “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

Obedience Matters

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 1,000-foot-deep hole 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 takes time 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 agenda (Luke 9:23). That's not hard until you want to go shopping, fishing, or whatever, and God wants you to do something else.

God has chosen you and all other believers to obey 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 reveals 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 lives. Meanwhile, 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" where you might expect the word "belief." Hebrews 5:8–9 (NIV) says 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 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 replaced our stove's burners and the deteriorating pans beneath them. That improved the stove's appearance.

The first time I tried to use a burner, it didn't work. It remained at room temperature. It looked better than the old burner, but it didn't function because I hadn't connected it properly.

I got my summer job with the Pennsylvania Fish Commission through my father's connections. That job opened the door to 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 those doors 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 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 that kept me from connecting with 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).

My connection with God has made a gigantic, life-transforming difference!

How does your connection with God affect your thoughts, feelings, and behavior today? Read 2 Corinthians 2.

152 Pine Tree Parable

I saw it—a pine tree 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.

Life invaded the nonliving and prevailed. The tree endured 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 produces. 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 spend almost sixty-four billion dollars to smell good.¹ People like me are content merely not to smell bad.

If I smell good, my wife will feel bad! Not everyone enjoys fragrances wafting on the morning breeze.

She is allergic to the scents of perfumes and flowers. She gets everything unscented, 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 scent of a prize rose in Hershey Gardens.

It's sweet-smelling obedience. It willingly and 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 would 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).

Cheerful, willing sacrifices for God and others are His favorite perfume. It's the fragrance of Christ No. 1.

It imitates the sacrifice His Son made to save you from eternal pain. As you sacrifice to follow God's path, you give Him pleasure.

You experience it yourself. Mysteriorously, 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 have sacrifices you've made for God and others brought 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 because it blends into its surroundings.

Obedience tests often blend into the background of your day. Unexceptional moments surround them.

Suddenly, a decisive moment appears out of nowhere. It's good to be better prepared for such moments 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 helped her and her mother pick them up.

I felt the urge to do it, but I didn't. An opportunity to love my neighbor slipped away.

God punctuates your life with obedience tests. He left some of Canaan's residents 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?

Your faith must become visible. Hopefully, the memory of my missed opportunity will spur me to act during future opportunities to serve.

And, yes, obedience tests are faith tests too. You often feel inadequate to meet a need. Nevertheless, you must step out in faith, trusting that God's resources are 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. Meanwhile, British anthropologist Robin Dunbar says you can maintain only five close friendships.¹ [Robin Dunbar](#)

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 the burdens on their hearts.

Facebook relationships are more about impressing than supporting. They don't show the backstage of life. 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 God to deliver them from the Babylonians (Jeremiah 37:3). 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 by attending worship services more or less regularly and making the offering plate a little heavier.

He insists that you seek His Kingdom and righteousness first (Matthew 6:33). Draw near to Him. Allow Him to clean up your ugliness.

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 throughout the week.

May your dreams, your use of time and money, your conversations, and your thoughts center on God. He isn't satisfied with 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 the garbage can to the curb for pickup?” his father asked. He rebelliously screamed, “Because I don’t feel like it!”

Many people drive in the passing lane on the Folly Turnpike. Eventually, they must pay the toll.

My father’s discipline spared me the inevitable price people pay who do only what they want to do. Being enthusiastic about doing my chores was optional. Doing them wasn’t!

I feared my father too much to disobey. Similarly, “the 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 that traveling the narrow road that leads to life (Matthew 7:14) is best for you and for others your life touches.

In the coronavirus world of 2020, doing whatever you wanted wasn’t wise. Neither was living as if the threat were 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 tragedy.

When the facts emerge, folly is frequently the culprit—speeding, texting while driving, or driving under the influence.

Folly maximizes the mistakes you make. Wisdom minimizes them. Are you doing what you want as a way of life or what God wants? The former brings inevitable, undesirable consequences. Proverbs 9:13–18 reveals the ultimate toll of living disconnected from God.

The wise live vitally connected to Him. They're skilled at living for Him. Their good fruit results from persistently doing right even when they feel like doing nothing. They feel good when they do good.

On the other hand, those who consistently do what they want are skilled only at living for themselves. They feel good when they do wrong (verse 17). They don't know they're already deep in the realm of the dead (verse 18).

*How would greater skill in godly living help you escape the folly toll?
How does that motivate you to continue growing 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 low on the maturity dipstick. A few showed Corvette-like intellectual development, but their emotional maturity was still 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.

What are the marks of maturity? Mature people keep their promises. Neither flattery nor criticism derails 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 application of what they know.

Their lives produce Jesus-like fruit (Ephesians 4:13). "The seed that fell among thorns stands for 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 under Devotional 95, "Are You Noticeably Different?"

What is your weakest area? What is one practical step you can take to strengthen it? Read 2 Corinthians 8.

Chapter 17

God 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 your top five favorite things in life.

He won't share His throne with any rivals. He forbids having other gods before Him or making an idol in the form of anything He created (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 are you for God 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 represent your place on the ladder of success. The material things around you reveal what you value.

God isn't against fun or feeling good. He created you with the capacity to enjoy Him and the things He has 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 is whether you'll walk the path God sets before you. Will you trust His judgment? Will you pretend you know better than He does 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 as if they love pleasure far more than God. They spent \$646 billion on outdoor recreation in 2010.

That's more than five times what they gave to their churches in 2009.¹ Preoccupation with pleasure decreases the time available to nurture your spiritual life and minister to others.

You can overcome pleasure's attraction through the self-control the Holy Spirit provides (Galatians 5:23). God promises that whenever

you face temptation, He will faithfully provide a way out (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Expect Him to give you that way of escape. Look for it.²

Identify God's rivals by examining your "images," purchases, thoughts when you're free to think, and how you use your time.

Read 2 Corinthians 9.

159 Flee from Idolatry (2)

Heroes embody your ideals. They're already what you'd like to be. Your choice of heroes changes over time. It reveals what matters most to you.

Your heroes are your dreams with skin on them. They fall into two categories—faith heroes and other kinds.

Imitating faith heroes will move you toward God. Hebrews 11 lists heroes who, by faith, overcame life's obstacles. Imitating other kinds of heroes can move you away from God.

You become progressively more like whatever you worship. Few people look up to spiritual heroes like the apostle Paul. He challenged the Philippians to practice what they'd learned, received, heard from, and 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 imitate God (Ephesians 5:1). Follow someone who follows Christ's example (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Hero worship pours gasoline on the fires of your self-centered dreams. It suggests they're attainable and worth pursuing.

You worship what you wish you were. You hope 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 to them. Those goals became 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 "protective" walls.

Often, you trust money to protect you. Paul labels greed—the desire to accumulate more—as idolatry (Colossians 3:5).

Jesus said you can't serve God and money (Matthew 6:24). Your heart and your treasure live together.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 nearly a 30 percent chance of experiencing COVID-related depression. If you were struggling economically, the chance was nearly 50 percent.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 should address threats intelligently. But you also need God's wisdom to explore what lies beneath your discouragement. The deeper problem may be that you're trusting unreliable 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 turn to it because you think He's inadequate 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 can become 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 it and God (Matthew 6:24). Money talks, but it's often "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

Do 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 those who are spiritual and religious, that might mean attending religious meetings between one and eight hours a month.

For those who are spiritual but not religious, it might include thinking about a higher power sporadically. It might happen when encountering the Grand Canyon.

It might occur amid the yellow, orange, and red explosions of autumn foliage. It might strike 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?

Such thinking is a symptom of a life that's all about me. Virtuous, self-centered living 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 you can take to make your family, work, recreation, health, home, finances, relationships, and education 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 a trust problem.

You can trust the One who sacrificed His Son for you (John 3:16). The Father promises to provide whatever you need through Him (Romans 8:32).

What is that prized coin in your pocket? Is it in 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 vigorously wave the white flag of surrender, your hand won't be able to cling to lesser things.

Waving the white flag releases you from the prison of your special coin. 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 traveling, anxious to get to the beach. I can be like that too.

I want to get somewhere and become someone 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 getting me somewhere by a course I've charted.

Before I drive to a place I've never been, I get directions from Google Maps. I want the big picture of the route numbers and streets. I write down the directions and take them with me.

God doesn't give me the big-picture directions I covet. He directs me 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 to listen to and trust 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. 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).

Samuel had to discern 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.

God leads one step at a time. How close to Him do you need to be daily? Read Galatians 1.

164 What Are You Doing Today?

Since I retired, my wife sometimes asks about my agenda for the day. I might tell her I'm working in the garden. Sometimes I tell her I'm writing a blog post.

In warmer weather, I might be mowing the grass. Occasionally, I'm picking up sticks in the yard.

I might be preparing a Bible study. I 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 can bump "what you're doing today" out of the way.

If you're like me, you can easily miss those divine interruptions. You think you don't have time for them. Those interruptions can 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 preparing a life-altering change of direction—Saul would become Israel's first king.

Sometimes God's interruptions are minor, like traffic lights. They temporarily stop you to help someone.

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 workplace missionaries 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 and review my notes for the Wednesday night Bible class I teach.

I will trim weeds around the house and coach at a home track meet. The truth is that I didn'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 my original agenda. I added and completed other 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 better moments, I realize opportunities hide behind the interruptions. 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 agenda for them.

Real life is in the interruptions. It's not in completing your agenda! Interruptions are often divine appointments. That puts interruptions and changes to your agenda in perspective.

When did God interrupt your agenda with a divine appointment to collaborate with Him to meet someone's pressing need?

Read Galatians 3.

166 Name of Fame

Where do you most want your name to appear? My name has never been up in lights. I'm more likely in "Who's That?" than "Who's Who."

Not being named 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 measures of my worth. I've spent too much time trying to prove my worth. Have you done the same?

Life is most fulfilling when I meet 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 in "Who's Who."

Have you experienced the same benefits of upside-down, others-focused living that aligns 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 what 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).

Having your name appear in the Book of Life is eternally and supremely valuable. That's the kind of fame that 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 taken a bite yet.

This new product has its critics. They question how healthy it is because it is highly processed and contains GMOs.

Others defend it, saying it's at least as healthy as beef and causes less harm to the environment.

What's in your hamburger bun can significantly affect carbon dioxide emissions over time.

Similarly, what's at the center of your life critically affects your quality of life and that of others, now and forever. There are only two applicants for the job—your agenda and God's agenda.

Putting your agenda at 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 in the long haul. Keeping God's agenda in the center is a daily choice (Romans 12:1). That is 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 lower your resistance to submissive obedience. Whatever it takes!

He must be supreme in every area of your life (Colossians 1:18). What's at 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

God's Ways

Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.

HEBREWS 3:10 NIV

168 Checking the Foundation

Spilling drinks 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 tablecloth as a dam. He blocked the wave as it cascaded southeast toward the floor.

Our kitchen floor wasn't level because the foundation wasn't. Spilled drinks in our kitchen still flow southeast today.

If the foundation is wrong, the rest of the house won't be right. The foundation on which you build your life matters. Is it trustworthy? Is it square?

In America, you can choose from many foundations that aren't square. The cement blocks that compose them include money, education, religion, eating for pleasure, politics, sports, alcohol, partying, relationships, and entertainment.

They can't support a meaningful or satisfying life. 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). Possessions can't fill the empty place in your heart.

The one square, trustworthy foundation on which to build is obedience to 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 enough for 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 an extraordinary sense of smell, 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 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. Deceptively, they 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 a good day to decide anew 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.

We all ate what was served without comment. 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 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 sometimes flashed hand signals. He used them to direct my brothers and me from a distance.

We had a better chance of winning the lottery (even though there wasn’t one) 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” illustrates how He relates to us. Generally, His hand is either heavy upon us or gracious toward us (thumbs down or thumbs up).

His response isn’t random. It depends on our response to Him. The Philistines experienced God’s heavy hand 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 obedient people put their hands to (Deuteronomy 12:7, 18; 14:29; 15:10, 18; 16:15; 23:20; 24:19; 28:8; 30:9).

His gracious hand was on 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—the choice is ours. 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 journey down life’s path?

You must learn from your past without allowing its failures and regrets to paralyze you. A personal failure taught me people are 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, you can escape their gusts by taking refuge in Him, your 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 His kingdom and righteousness first, 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 become comfortable with our culture's values. "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 farther and straighter. 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 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 people near and far. Littering is convenient. But it creates a mess for someone else to clean up.

Clearing the Amazon rainforest for farmland and pastures affects the air and climate experienced by billions of people.

Flushing medications down the toilet can pollute someone else's drinking water.

Too much fertilizer on crops in Ohio contributes to algal blooms in Lake Erie.

On the other hand, supporting a child in Haiti can significantly improve that child's health and future.

Sending an Operation Christmas Child shoebox can bring 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 can last far longer and use much less energy than an incandescent bulb. The latter releases 90 percent of the energy it consumes as heat.¹

While consuming relatively little electricity, LEDs produce light for a long time. LED living means 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 to be served. 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 means 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 can allow 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 reaction against 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 over a lunch break.

From eight feet away, he whipped the ball at me. I didn't expect it. I didn't react in time. 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 can also be hazardous to your health! Emotional and physical reactions after an act of vengeance can include negative moods and depression, increased psychosomatic illness, greater stress, and poorer heart health.¹

Counter-revenge attacks often follow. The person exacting revenge thinks the act was fair in light of 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 include the relationships between the Israelis and Palestinians and 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 because of 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 shot a BB gun at a can about forty feet away. One BB ricocheted 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, what will people remember about you? It might not be what you think.

My brother, Sam, has been an excellent dentist for many years. Recently, a friend told me a story about him. My friend's wife had a dental appointment with my brother twenty-plus years ago. She had to drive about ten miles to his office.

When she arrived, she discovered that her cat had made the journey with her. It was under the hood of the car. My brother interrupted his dental work to rescue the cat. When she was in emotional distress, my brother helped her.

My friend didn't tell me a story about my brother's dental expertise. He remembered an act of unexpected kindness 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 caring for my teeth since I was in my twenties. What I remember most, however, are the times I've had plumbing or other emergencies, 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 those sermons.

But they never forget the 30 minutes I spent with them in an 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 mostly weeds!

Around 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, the garden wasn't yet an 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!" These two statements point confusingly in opposite directions. I've heard people say both of them. Neither statement appears in the Bible.

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

Homer was born in 1920. His mental sharpness was far above that of the typical man 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" people. They're trying to dethrone the One who identified Himself as "I AM" (Exodus 3:14).

In other words, many 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 in which 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).

It 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).

In the 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. 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 you must choose your parents wisely. I was jokingly referring to the influence of heredity. I told him 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 the simplicity of a single secret. But life is more complex than that.

Following Jesus has no easy button. I'd summarize it with the words of an old hymn. You must trust and obey Jesus. The question is, "How do you do that?"

Naturally strong, fast, quick, and coordinated athletes often excel effortlessly in sports. Naturally gifted 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 (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 can't answer every possible question about following Jesus. What I've learned about following Him over fifty years is reflected in the resources on my

website, I invite you to check it out.

<https://www.christiangrowthresources.com>.

What makes following Jesus hard for you? Read Philippians 4.

Chapter 19

God Is Worthy of 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 that He was God. In the early church, it was exactly the opposite.

Spiritual leaders who promoted false teachings denied that Jesus was both fully God and fully man. Cerinthus incorrectly taught that Christ came upon Jesus at His baptism and left Him at the crucifixion. According to him, Jesus was merely a man. Wrong! Jesus is God with skin on!

Jesus Christ is more than a great man and a great teacher. In Greek mythology, beings who were half human and half god were demigods. One parent was a god; the other was human.

Jesus wasn't a demigod. His conception was miraculous. Mary was human, and 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*. During a 2009 appearance on “Inside the Actors 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 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 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 God can do—forgive sins (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 who 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 how Jesus’ opponents understood His claims. They tried to kill Him because they thought He was breaking the Sabbath. Furthermore, He claimed a unique relationship with the Father, making Himself equal with God (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 that person's 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 (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 to reveal God the Father to you. 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).

We're 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.

We're often so preoccupied with trying to be number one that we don't give proper worship to Him who is number one. The spotlight can be on your accomplishments or Jesus, but not both. In subtle and not-so-subtle ways, we spend much of our lives trying to steal the glory that should be His alone.

Colossians 1:15–18 describes Jesus' number one status in three ways. He's the image of God, like a reflection of Him in a mirror. He perfectly reveals what God is like.

He's the firstborn (first in rank) over all creation. He created it to accomplish His will and bring Him glory.

He's the head of the church (the collection of all believers, past, present, and future). He's its Leader and the source of its life.

He has first place in everything (Colossians 1:18). Instead of saying, "We're number one," we should say, "Jesus is number one."

In Philippians 2:10–11, every knee bows before Jesus as every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord. Calling Jesus Lord implies that you obey Him (Luke 6:46).

You owe Jesus complete obedience. He's your ultimate boss with authority over every area of your life.¹

What relationships and areas of life do you especially need to submit to Jesus' control?

...friends ...brothers/sisters

...spouse ...coworkers

...parents/guardians ...boss

... neighbors ...relatives

...other Christians ...money

... unbelievers

Read Colossians 2.

181 Who Is the Most Mysterious Man Ever?

It's a mystery that Jesus has both a divine nature and a human nature yet is only one person. That conclusion is based on all the evidence in Scripture.

He's unique. He's one of a kind. It shouldn't surprise you that you can't fathom everything about God or His ways.

“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 55:8–9 NIV). The finite can't fully comprehend the infinite.

Jesus is fully human. He experienced human birth (Galatians 4:4) and normal human development (Luke 2:40). He grew in wisdom, stature, and in favor with God and people (Luke 2:52). He had a physical body (Hebrews 10:5).

He had human names. Jesus is the Greek equivalent of the Old Testament name “Joshua.” He's the son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1).

He had human weaknesses as we do. 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 a man 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. They doubt He is God.

Jesus has the attributes of deity. He's eternal. He existed before John (John 1:15), Abraham (John 8:58), and the world (John 17:5). He existed in the beginning (John 1:1). He continues forever (Hebrews 1:11).

He was in heaven while on earth (John 3:13). He remains with His followers on earth while He is in heaven (Matthew 28:20). He fills everything (Ephesians 1:23). 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 is called "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 sustainer (Colossians 1:17). He forgives sin (Matthew 9:2, 6). He raises the dead (John 5:21). He will execute all judgment (John 5:22).

He's the greatest and most mysterious man ever!

How does Jesus' identity enable you to relate to 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 eternally as three distinct, coequal persons. They are 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 takes precedence over what limited human reason may consider a contradiction.

If I try to explain the Trinity, I'll lose my mind. If I deny it, I jeopardize my soul.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit mysteriously dwell in perfect unity. They work together to accomplish God's plan for the ages.

"Trinity" isn't a biblical term. Tertullian helped introduce the term into Christian theology about 1,800 years ago. He used it to express what the Bible teaches about God's nature.

Jesus is the Son of God (John 9:35, Romans 1:4). He is the one and only Son (John 3:16, 18). He is the firstborn Son (Heb 1:6).

He was the 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 is all-powerful (Hebrews 1:3, Revelation 1:8). He is all-knowing (Jn 16:30, 21:17). He is present everywhere (Matthew 28:20). He is unchangeable (Hebrews 13:8).

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are frequently interconnected in the Bible. There is far more biblical 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 is 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. We took 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 made the ultimate sacrifice so we can live in freedom. We do that on Memorial Day weekend between laps of the Indianapolis 500 and servings at the backyard barbecue!

Seriously, we don't always remember our fallen heroes with the gratitude 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 were to be daily reference points.

They were to motivate present obedience (1 Chronicles 16:12). He remembers and blesses His people. He judges those who oppose them.

You sometimes forget the sacrifices of those who made your freedom possible. But God always remembers and keeps His promises (Psalm 105:8). He chooses not to remember 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." Worshiping God as a way of life begins with remembering.

How is spiritual forgetfulness harmful to your spiritual health? What habits will you start to help you remember what God has done for you?

Read 1 Thessalonians 1.

184 Conformity

Your thoughts, feelings, and behavior tend to 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 shapers of your life have battled 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 influences 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 KJV). God's will and the world's will are mutually exclusive.

You're born loving this world. You are wired to follow the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.

The world encourages you like a demonic cheerleader. Satisfy your desires. Make your name great. Go after girls or 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 that believing lies created (John 8:32).

This reprogramming requires your cooperation and discipline. Life isn't about you; it's 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 glorify God. Loving Him and walking with Him make 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.

How 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 nonstick pans that now stick. I'm glad God doesn't discard broken people the same way.

Christmas celebrates a gift. It wasn't under a tree, but eventually hung on one. God gave this gift to restore your broken relationship with Him. Giving it required His Son to humble Himself by becoming

a human. He initially slept in a smelly bed of scratchy hay while remaining fully God.

A broken pencil symbolizes humanity's severed spiritual connection with God by doubt and disobedience (Genesis 3). As God had warned, the result was spiritual and physical death. Brokenness accompanies both (Genesis 2:17).

God temporarily provided animal sacrifices to address this brokenness. But they were like taping a broken pencil together (Hebrews 10:1–4). They weren't a permanent solution.

At just the right time, God gave His best gift. Jesus was born in Bethlehem to provide the 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. It requires receiving God's best gift.

God restores broken people as they repent and believe the good news. Jesus is the gift whose death, burial, and resurrection make you whole (Mark 1:15; Hebrews 10:10).

I suggest wrapping broken and unbroken pencils together. Put 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 primarily to bless, entertain, heal, or make you feel good. You don't attend a worship service to "get something."

Worship is your whole being giving glory to a holy God. It doesn't end at noon on Sunday morning. All of life is an act of worship.

Your whole being 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 Worshiping God changes you.

True worshipers 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.

In Isaiah 6, God reveals Himself to Isaiah as seated 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). His response of the 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. Revelation leads to a response through prayer, song, and self-giving to God and your neighbor. You haven't worshipped fully until you've given yourself away to God and others!

This is true and proper worship (Romans 12:1). True worshippers obey and serve the One they say they 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 building (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).

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, on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue will 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 fan existing flames with the wind of the Spirit, not to ignite wet wood!

When you're spiritually sick, you may go through the motions of worship out of obligation or habit. The Father seeks those who worship Him in spirit and truth (John 4:24).

True worship requires a willingness to serve, obey, and submit to the Lord. It's motivated by love and gratitude for who God is and all He's done.

Attitude is more important than architecture. How you worship is more important than where you worship.

Seventy percent of Israel's religious holidays were celebrations (Leviticus 23). Worship includes both joyful celebration and solemn reflection.¹

Is your worship tilted more toward celebration or reflection? How can you improve the balance? Read 1 Thessalonians 5.

Chapter 20

God's Church

And he is the head of the body, the church.

COLOSSIANS 1:18 NIV

88 What Church Is About

The Pew Research Center identified the following ten leading 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, gives their children a moral foundation, helps them become better people, and provides comfort in times of adversity.

It also helps them deal with life's challenges, gives them a sense of belonging, and allows them to continue family traditions.

It expands their social network and may even keep significant others from pressuring them about church attendance. Most of these reasons are different ways of saying, "I go because the ministries of my church meet my needs."

The better a local church meets the needs of its attendees, the more enthusiastic they tend to be about it. Churches should meet people's needs. That's what love does.

Gathering with other believers is important (Hebrews 10:24-25), but meeting together is not an end in itself. It is part of a larger purpose.

The goal is not the long-term survival of individual local churches. The goal is the long-term survival and expansion of the gospel.

The church is God's vehicle for passing the Christian faith intact from generation to generation. That includes what to believe and teach (1 Timothy 2:2) and how to live (Philippians 4:9).

The church is to equip Jesus' followers to conform to His will and ways from generation to generation. Local churches that do this tend to grow, but numerical growth is not the goal.

Imagine God's will and ways as a baton. The measure of a church is how effectively its members receive that baton—conforming to God's will and ways—and pass it to the next generation without dropping it.

How is the church like a track relay?

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 that Jesus' disciples were eating with unwashed hands. They were breaking the rules.

Like many traditions today, handwashing began as a legitimate practice. The washings in Exodus 30:19–20 taught the priests that they needed a pure heart to enter God's presence.

Then they made the symbol a required spiritual exercise for everyone. Eventually, handwashing itself became the focus, while purity before God was ignored.

You can easily fall into the same trap today. The Lord commissioned the church to make disciples (Matthew 28:19–20). Yet many churches are more committed to maintaining and preserving their traditions than to 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 what not to do.

Jesus explained in Mark 7:18–23 that external things don't defile you. Instead, the thoughts and actions that defile you spring from your rebellious heart. Rebellion against God among church members hinders a church's ministry more than anything else.

Beginning in Mark 7:24, we read about Jesus' journey to Phoenicia. A Gentile woman approached Him, believing He could cast a demon out of her daughter.

Jesus appeared indifferent to her need. He seemed to refuse her request because she was a Gentile.

Still, she 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 had remained bound by 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)

As a child, I once pretended to be sick to avoid going to church. Within a day or two, I actually became ill. Was it a coincidence? Let me 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 regularly attending worship services.

Regular church attendance suggests real progress for new believers who didn't previously attend. 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 attend worship services is at least as important as attending them.

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 encounter God in a way you don't when you worship Him privately.

In God's presence is fullness of joy (Psalm 16:11). Worshiping Jesus with other followers brings joy!

The church isn't a building with pews, theater seats, or folding chairs. It isn't a place where a few perform, and many criticize.

It's a living organism God created—the body of which Christ is the 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.

Christians should serve in Christ's church. Christianity isn't an individual endeavor.

Football players depend on one another to fulfill their assigned roles for the team to succeed. So it is with the body of Christ, the church.

How do you explain the difference between attending church services and being the church? Read 2 Thessalonians 3.

191 Being the Church (2)

You need the other members of the church, and they need you (1 Corinthians 12:17–21).

You're like an index finger. The hand (church) can't function properly without you, and you can't function properly apart from your designated place in the hand.

The hand is home. Both the hand and the index finger need a vital connection to the head (Christ).

Christian fellowship means sharing. As a believer, you share Christ's life with other believers. You share the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

You share cleansing from sin, a commitment to follow Him, membership in His body, and much more.

Fellowship implies union and oneness. Marriage pictures this relationship.

Two become one in marriage. Likewise, all believers become one through the Holy Spirit, who baptizes 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 through the 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 devoted themselves to fellowship, the apostles' teaching, the breaking of bread (the Lord's Supper), and prayer (Acts 2:42). All these were channels through which God's life flowed.

Ephesians 4 describes the flow of God's life in the church and its purpose. The members of God's church are to be humble, gentle, and patient.

They are to bear with other believers in love (v. 2) and make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit (v. 3).

They use the gifts of grace Christ has apportioned to do works of service that build up the church (vv. 7–12). Together, they express 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're one of its tires. You find your purpose on the wheel, and the car depends on you to run properly.

Effective Christianity requires organized collaboration. Together, you can accomplish more than you can imagine through God's power at work in all of you (Ephesians 3:20).

The word of God equips you to carry God's life to others. It is living and active (Hebrews 4:12).

As you take it into your life, it changes your thinking (Romans 12:2). Your relationships become increasingly healthy and full of God's life. The church teaches and preaches God's word to build your spiritual muscles and prepare 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, you and other believers, you and your neighbors, and between you and your enemies.

You demonstrate that love through your spiritual gift(s) (1 Corinthians 12:4–5) as you serve others (John 13:14–16) and spur one another on toward ever-increasing love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24).

Love flowing among believers is the distinguishing mark of Jesus' followers (John 13:34–35). That's why believers mustn't give up meeting together (Hebrews 10:25).

You can love other believers only as you associate with and relate to them. Attending a local church also demonstrates your allegiance to Jesus to those who don't believe in Him (Matthew 10:32).

Attending church services is different from being the church. Jesus' fans go to church. His followers are the church.

Fans are like insulation; followers are like copper wire. God's power flows through the wire, 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 understanding of her Christian responsibility. Barring health issues and other limiting factors, spiritually healthy believers actively participate in the church.

But not everyone who attends church services is a Christian. The challenge isn’t merely to go to church but to be the church.

That’s true whether you’re a vital part of a 1,000-person congregation 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, “What team do you play for?” I reply, “I don’t play for any team.”

That’s 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, with a place and a responsibility.

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). In other words, 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 are to build up His body toward unity and maturity so it reflects 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 to help fulfill the purpose for which He created you. You need the church, like you need the food you eat and the air you breathe.

Life isn’t about you. It’s about fulfilling the purpose for which God created you. For that, you need the church.

What is your next step toward being the 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 did. She died when I was seven.

Then, at age sixty-four, my never-married Aunt Elizabeth left her job and moved into our home. She cared for five boys between the ages of one and thirteen.

Knowing us boys, I wouldn’t have volunteered for that retirement assignment! Through her example, she taught me to serve others unselfishly.

My father taught me how to work and drive a car. He emphasized the importance of keeping my promises. I unconsciously absorbed and imitated countless other lessons he taught me.

Who has brought out the best in you spiritually? John Gruver and Dick Stum taught me the fundamentals of the Christian faith.

Blair Cook helped steer me toward vocational ministry. Josh McDowell, Paul Little, C. S. Lewis, A. W. Tozer, and John Piper shaped me through their writings.

Walter Kaiser Jr., Donald Carson, David Hesselgrave, and others helped prepare me for pastoral ministry. Pastor Charlie Yost, Pastor Kimberly Shifler, 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 has gifted you to minister effectively to others.

He has given me the ability to teach and write. Those who have shaped me spiritually have enhanced my ability to help others.

My computer, connected to the internet, has enabled millions of people thousands of miles away to read what I write.

A cell phone’s battery needs a power source and recharge to keep operating. Likewise, you benefit from connecting with the unique gifts of grace God has given other believers.

They benefit from connecting with your gifts. You live most effectively when you’re connected with other Christians and “spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10:24 NIV). Faith-linking is at 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. They must keep their eyes glued to it from the beginning to the end of the service. Those who are not fluent in the cyber world must bring a child or grandchild who is.

Church officials forbid eye contact or conversation with other live persons at the service. Breaking this rule will result in excommunication from the church.

Texting and tweeting are encouraged, but they must not involve others sitting in the sanctuary.

Everyone watches the live-streamed church service that most appeals to them. Ideally, everyone will be watching a different service.

Streamed services vary in length. Everyone may leave whenever the worship service they are watching concludes. Church leaders forbid interpersonal interaction while attendees exit the sanctuary.

Church leaders value diversity. Singing along with the streamed service is permitted. But please, no harmony.

You may be 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 Cyber Sunday attendees regular attenders. There's also a 90 percent reduction in your tithe.

You qualify to be a church elder after attending two Cyber Sunday services. Of course, all of that is tongue-in-cheek.

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 toward love and good deeds (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 (allowing for exaggeration)?

How can modern technology hinder worshiping God in spirit and truth?

Read 1 Timothy 5.

196 We Got This!

“I got this” is the motto of the self-confident. 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 persistent pressure to problems or challenges, they usually bend, break, or dissolve. That approach has often worked for me.

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. In stormy spiritual seas, it immediately takes on water. It’s a sinking ship.

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.” In the spiritual realm, that’s better than “I got this,” which, as I’ve already suggested, 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 church, His body (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 on everyone’s heart. He could have. Instead, He uses people to communicate it and live it out.

I shouldn’t have to keep changing gears from “I got this” to “We got this.” “We got this” is the only gear I 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 me of the church. Interlocking pieces 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 complete a jigsaw puzzle. “As it is, there are many parts, but one body” (1 Corinthians 12:20 NIV). Many healthy believers living together in loving harmony represent Christ more accurately than any individual believer, including the pastor.

Matthew 5:14 (NIV) says, “You (plural) are the light of the world.” In other words, all of you together form a picture of Christ for the world to see. Those outside 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 individual.

We need all the gifts of the Spirit. We also need the fruit of the Spirit. Through both, we reflect Jesus as accurately as possible.

The part of the picture you compose is a little fuzzy because you’re less than a perfect copy of your Savior.

But put the church puzzle pieces together in their proper places and love other believers. The picture might not be Michelangelo quality, but others will see Jesus.

God is in charge of the puzzle design. Some churches have twenty-five pieces. Others 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. More pieces may still be in the box than we realize.

Assembling the puzzle is an ongoing process. All puzzles (churches) are important. God designs each one to impact the people in its community.

He designs churches to be pictures of Jesus. God revealed 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 the church to accomplish a similar 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 fulfilling 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 represented by the church puzzle won't be clear if seventy-five percent of its pieces are missing. Instead, they're criticizing or spectating from the comfort of the puzzle box.

The church puzzle consists of people who are God's church, not people who merely go 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 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 of the gift(s) the Spirit has given you. Nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.

Believers who don't know their spiritual gifts are like mechanics who don't recognize the tools in their toolbox.

Even if they recognize the tools, they may not know how to use them. The sooner that's corrected, the better.

Your divine design includes your spiritual passion, spiritual gifts, and temperament. To identify these three, see "*Becoming an Enthusiastic Church*," Chapter 7, "Healthy Ministry" (<https://www.christiangrowthresources.com/becoming-an-enthusiastic-church>).

These 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 can help those still in the puzzle box become contributing parts of the picture of Christ.

What's your spiritual passion? What are your spiritual gifts? What's your temperament? Read 2 Timothy 2.

199 The Church Puzzle Parable (3)

Church puzzle pieces have a limited life expectancy. God, working through church leaders, must replace them over time. Otherwise, a local church will eventually cease to exist.

Do you know the best way to add new pieces to the church puzzle? 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 and equips them to serve others.

Three groups of people are potential replacement pieces for the church puzzle. But they aren't part of the puzzle.

The first group consists of believers in Jesus who attend church services but 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.

The second group consists of seekers who already attend church services. They aren't yet believers in Jesus Christ, but they're seeking truth. Jesus is that truth (John 14:6).

If you're in this group, God calls you to turn from living for yourself to living for Him. He invites you to receive His gifts—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 express 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 and 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 and aren’t attending any church.

Jesus commissioned the church to reach them through its ministry. The church 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 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 becoming a blessing as a piece of the church puzzle? Read 2 Timothy 3.

Chapter 21

Healing for Your Wounds

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

P.S. Congratulations on winning the Powerball jackpot!

God loves you because of who He is, not because of who you are or what He can get from you. You can easily overestimate how loving you are.

You're like a guy who sees a better-looking person in the mirror than anyone else sees! 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 it on your own.

Human love is like swamp water. It smells like rotten eggs. Your motives are often self-serving (see Rhonda above!).

God's love is like pure, sparkling spring water. Better source, 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). Under the Holy Spirit's control, love flows from you like rivers of living water (John 7:38)!

How has Jesus' love DNA made a difference in your life? Read 2 Timothy 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 a red Coleman canoe. The third climbed aboard without centering his weight.

In a split second, my twin brother and I went from breathing air to blowing bubbles beneath the canoe. Love, like canoeing or walking a tightrope, 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 requires balancing love for God, other believers, and unbelieving neighbors in need. For me, loving unbelieving “neighbors” needs to be a higher priority. I’m trying to be more intentional in that area.

Another force that can throw you off balance is centering your life on someone or something other than God. Idolatry makes a God-substitute your life’s defining passion.

I’ve often thought 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 it can’t make 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 that a healthy balance reveals itself at the end of each day. It exists when you can specifically describe how you loved God, helped another believer, and 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 requires openness and vulnerability.

Unless the box turtle becomes vulnerable, it'll never cross the road or taste the sweet berries on the other side.

Loving openness begins with trust. You speak the truth honestly and lovingly (Ephesians 4:15). You share your brokenness and your hurts.

You tell others why they're special to you. You listen to understand both their thoughts and feelings.

You extend grace. You cut people some slack when they disappoint you. You forgive those who've hurt you and don't hold their sins against them.

You're transparent. You are 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. You laugh with others and show them you enjoy their company.

The easiest place to be open is with a trusted person or a small group. Sticking your neck out can be scary and threatening. Like most worthwhile things, it's easier to talk about than to do.

People may have hurt you when you shared your thoughts and feelings. You may not feel safe being vulnerable. But if you don't

stick your neck out, you'll never reach 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 mountaintop elation. It's visible on your face. I felt it when I got an "A" on a test and when I won a medal in track and field.

It lights up my life when I catch a big 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 showed 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 hit another pothole, the wheels of your life start wobbling alarmingly. Joy is noticeably absent.

Where is joy 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 stares adversity in the face without blinking. It can fill your heart with peace even 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 because he was with the Lord he loved. God's joy comforted me where ordinary joy couldn't tread.

God's joy comes only from Jesus. He's the sole distributor.

It's four-wheel-drive joy. It provides emotional traction regardless of the circumstances.

Jesus says 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 produces it in the hearts of those who surrender control of their lives to Him (Galatians 5:22). For me, ordinary joy is a luxury; God's joy is a necessity.

*When have you experienced God's joy in trying circumstances?
Read Titus 3.*

204 Got Joy?

Knowing how track-and-field throwers perform at their best can help you maximize joy. You might guess they throw farthest with an all-out, 110-percent effort. You'd be exactly wrong!

Maximum distance is a by-product of relaxed, precise execution of proper throwing technique. Trying to "kill it" tightens the muscles so they don't work together efficiently, producing disappointing results.

Likewise, you minimize joy when you make it 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 and what He has done.

The more you get God, the more you get joy. By contrast, believing lies about God, yourself, and others spawns 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 has 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 experience it when you actively trust and obey Him through all of 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 our family-tree expert. I didn't marry Diane McAdams in isolation; she came with a network of relationships.

Diane invited people to our wedding whom I didn't know or barely knew. The same was true 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, an original settler in Jamestown, Virginia, 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.

They are part of the fruit of the Spirit family (Galatians 5:22–23). They're vitally connected to the Holy Spirit and to one another. They share 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 empowers faith, obedience, and thanksgiving.

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).

Obedience is also commanded: "If you love me, keep my commands" (John 14:15 NIV). The same is true of the other family members. Joy is a by-product of them all.

Choose to trust and obey God, and you choose joy. Choose to do a kind deed, and you choose joy. Give thanks in all circumstances, and you choose joy (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

How will the choices you make today create an environment where joy abounds? Read Hebrews 1.

206 Do You Have God's Peace?

In 2020, the challenge was to find and maintain personal peace in a world threatened by COVID-19.

About 1990, I was fishing with Ernie in a small boat. I was running the outboard motor, and Ernie was in the front.

Suddenly, extraordinarily fierce winds swept over us. We were about eight hundred meters from the marina, and the swells quickly built to four to five feet.

I slowly and fearfully guided the small boat toward safety. We climbed each steep wave and slammed down again and again. We made slow progress.

Ernie was supernaturally serene. I worried that 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), contentment (Isaiah 26:3), prosperity (Psalm 122:6–7), and the absence of war (1 Samuel 7:14). In the New Testament, Jesus offers you His peace (John 14:27).

God's peace is inner tranquility and poise—a combination of hope, trust, and quietness of mind and soul.

You can have it because God made peace through Jesus' blood that He shed on the cross (Colossians 1:20). I first experienced it immediately after making peace with God by inviting Jesus into my life as my Savior and Lord.

Experiencing 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 your thinking.

No problem is too big for God. An extra-extra-extra-large, trustworthy God living in you should leave no room for worry.

Maintaining God's peace depends on doing what is 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 lifestyle of doing what is right. Life-shaping belief underlies a peaceful life.

When has God enabled you to live in the sphere of peace? Read Hebrews 2.

Chapter 22

Energy to Serve Others

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 became disheartened during a practice in the fall of 2007. She stopped throwing for the day. She couldn't take any more frustration.

She didn't give up, however. She kept working at it. Her perseverance led to five Pennsylvania track-and-field state championship medals by graduation.

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 but see only a couple of wrinkled raisins! You must persevere.

Those with average ability who persevere eventually overcome. They often accomplish more than those with greater abilities who give up easily.

A white oak's average lifespan of three hundred years begins with an acorn. It germinates and holds its ground.

In about twenty years, it begins producing acorns. By age 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 tip of the iceberg of my weirdness.

You have your 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 at not thinking negative thoughts. Both are important.

God gets glory when sinful, weird people like you bear with, forgive, and love sinful, odd people like me. That's not easy. 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 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 lifelong process.

God uses relationships to make you more like Jesus. You can't put up with weird people on your own.

But the Holy Spirit's power can make it happen. You trust Him to do what you can't.

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 put up with, forgive, and love odd believers like me through His enabling power.

How well do you patiently tolerate others' oddness without agitated silence? What's the next step? Read Hebrews 4.

209 Are You Impatient?

Your weird habits don't seem odd 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 as if 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 from weirdness. Because you're a sinner, you sin. That requires forgiveness in relationships. God gets the glory when weird and sinful people 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 underlies forbearance and forgiveness. Behind patience lie compassion and humility. Patience trickles and then gushes 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 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 enables you to treat others as He treats you.

That's better than either you or they deserve. You have to submit to Him 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 were the only law of the land and everyone followed it consistently. The USA would be a much safer and more united place! Being consistently kind could revolutionize your life.

Kindness is choosing to do what benefits others, even if it costs you time, money, or energy. As it turns out, scientists have found that being kind not only helps those you serve but also benefits you.

Kind actions release hormones in your body that make you feel good and can lower your blood pressure.

Intentional kindness expands and strengthens healthy relationships with others. That's correlated with living longer and reducing 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 also greases your own physical, emotional, and psychological gears.

You're created in God's image. That includes kindness. Being kind to your enemies shows that 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 bring them joy (Luke 6:35; Acts 14:17).

Applying that principle could transform our political climate and national divisions! Kindness starts with you, but the good news is that it's contagious. Those who witness or receive kindness often pass it on to others.

God intends His kindness to 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 and discovered that a stranger had already taken care of it.

Such gracious acts get your attention because you are not always kind to others, especially your family. You frequently shift out of kindness gear when you walk through 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 come out. 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 those who distribute kindness.

They're pockmarked 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.

God is kind (Titus 3:4). It's a characteristic of true love (1 Corinthians 13:4). Like love, kindness is based on the giver's character rather than the recipient's worthiness.

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, fed by the inexhaustible aquifers of His kindness. 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 for being a faucet of kindness that you turn off at will!
Christianity that works functions at home.

*Why is it more challenging to be kind at home than 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 for 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, ready to check out. She kindly invited me to go ahead of her.

I thanked her immediately and 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, a 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 push down on a hand soap dispenser to add a dab of soap to your hands.

Likewise, you choose to dispense the Holy Spirit’s kindness. Even though your mental and physical capacities may diminish with age, you can dispense kindness as long as you live!

Dispense God’s kindness 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 needed assistance!

Biblical goodness dwells on a higher plane than the goodness of ice cream. Human goodness is unimpressive because it can’t measure up to God’s standard of goodness—the life of Jesus Christ.

The Old Testament rarely mentions human goodness in a positive light. By contrast, Psalm 107 alone calls God’s goodness worthy of praise four times.

He is abundant in goodness and truth (Exodus 34:6). The Old Testament exalts God’s goodness and repeatedly 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 means choosing what is right and morally good while rejecting what is wrong and evil. God actively, aggressively, and zealously does good.

He takes the initiative to help you (Romans 5:8). God's mercy, graciousness, patience, forgiveness, and justice all express His goodness.

Goodness is more than abstaining from evil. It is knowing and doing the right thing. You display God's goodness when you are merciful, forgiving, gracious, just, patient, generous, and morally pure.

You show it through a compassionate heart. You demonstrate it by relieving 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 from a life that is right with Him and yielded to Him.

The Holy Spirit in you produces it (Galatians 5:22–23). Virtue and helpfulness characterize it. It draws others to God like iron to a magnet (Matthew 5:16).

You're a goodness magnet! You're most useful not on a refrigerator door or sitting on 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 April 1916, 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. Four months later, he returned to Elephant Island. He was faithful.

Faithfulness is dependability, trustworthiness, and reliability. Truth is the foundation of faithfulness. Jesus is full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

He keeps His promises. Your reputation depends on how well you keep yours. Moreover, if you call yourself a Christian, God's reputation depends on it too.

Faithfulness has a hand-in-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 the gold standard of faithfulness. "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 reputation and God’s? Read Hebrews 10.

215 Gentleness – Not What You Think

Gentleness is strength plus courage plus restraint. It’s not 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 submitting 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 the 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 that fruit (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.

The Apostle Paul appeals to you by the gentleness and sweet reasonableness of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:1). He tells you to gently restore those who are trapped in sin (Galatians 6:1). He adds that a life worthy of your calling is humble and gentle (Ephesians 4:2).

He instructs you to show humble gentleness toward everyone (Titus 3:2). Control your feelings and always be ready to help those in need.

Humble gentleness flows from the spring of wisdom (James 3:13). Be prepared to give the reason for your hope with gentleness and 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. It was negative! Seriously, you might consider a lack of self-control to be your greatest character weakness.

In the United States, 40 million are addicted to tobacco, 18 million to alcohol, 4.2 million to marijuana, 1.8 million to painkillers, 821,000 to cocaine, and 426,000 to heroin.¹

Other addictions abound—hobbies, food, and gambling. Controlling your words is a huge self-control challenge. 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 bird feeder.

Regular self-control is a limited resource. Some start the day with a small cup of patience. Others start with about four drops!

The more patience you use, the less 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 coexist with passion, pleasure, or pride controlling you. High-test self-control, like love, is a gift from God.

Like the gift of athletic ability, you must expend effort to develop it. Paul disciplined and controlled his body (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 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 through willpower alone.

What's supernatural about high-test self-control? What is your part?

Read Hebrews 12.

Chapter 23

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 within ten seconds. It takes a minute with a broom.

You need God’s power to replace your weakness. Without His strength, you might complete your “to-do” list, but not His.

How can you avoid power failure? God’s power is constantly available. That’s never a problem. No storm in life 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) means staying plugged into Him and His power.

To have an eternal impact, 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 Pennsylvania yard 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 and out of their usual 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 after these witnessing ventures. Witnessing night was over, or the evangelistic services had ended for another year.

I easily forget that being a 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 could no longer harvest them. I picked them green at the end of August. In about ten 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 entire top of the tree broke off.

Increasing age can make you content to rest 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 it 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. You can still show kindness and care even when your energy and mobility diminish.

You can send cards, make phone calls, and send encouraging electronic messages to others. I want to bless as many people as possible during my last years. What do you want?

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. Where you turn for strength reveals a lot. Lance Armstrong blew the spokes off other racers' bikes. 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 win.

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 that 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 defining truth of Georgia Congressman John Lewis’s life was the full equality of all people. He suffered to live it out.

He summoned his country to become 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, and he lived it out.

Bruce Wilkinson told of a Christian man who confessed that he lied to everyone. 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 time sheet and was paid for hours he didn't work.

Furthermore, his boss had told him to lie to customers. The man confessed his lies to his boss and said he wouldn't lie to or for him anymore.

Their two-hour conversation reminded his boss about 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 because it is contrary to the world's operating system and receives the world's hate (John 15:19).

Living the truth daily is one of the hardest, most costly things 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 accurately preparing income tax returns, honoring marriage vows, and keeping verbal or written contracts. Psalm 15:4 says that the one who abides in God's tabernacle and dwells on His holy hill keeps an 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 one of the hardest things 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 the penalty of sin (Romans 5:8).

The ultimate measure of your worth is that God gave Jesus to redeem 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 you when He is for you. That's contrary to Romans 8:32. God's giving His Son guarantees He will provide everything you need to serve Him. God is for you (Romans 8:31).

Why are you against yourself 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 His cleansing (1 John 1:9).

Do you feel unsuccessful because 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 others will glorify God (Matthew 5:16).

Your parents may have focused far more on what you did wrong than on what you did right. They rarely praised or encouraged you. They compared you unfavorably with your siblings. They made you earn their affection. God isn't like that.

No mule has ever won the Kentucky Derby! Are your expectations realistic?

Mom said you can do anything you set your mind to. That doesn't mean you can.

Most athletes I coach don't have the natural ability 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 in every area of life. Identify and develop your gifts. Keep developing your strengths, even though you will sometimes fail.

Finally, help others discover their gifts. Encourage them and seek to help them succeed. That melts away your 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 trudge through 180 unhappy school days 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 before I could stand on the happiness podium.

"I'll be happy when I'm done studying and can get a job." I was, but working 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 by 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 have to change for you to be happy? Or do you 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 what I don't have yet.

I'm discovering that gratitude is the gateway to today's happiness. At bedtime, I reflect on the blessings of the day.

I thank God for them. They typically include food, water, housing, clothing, relationships, and ways my life touched someone else that day. I've concluded I'll be happy when... I give thanks in everything (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Try it!

*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 can feel like days overflowing with doubt, despair, and discouragement running in packs.

People with depression may feel persistently sad, hopeless, unmotivated, and down on themselves. They may become increasingly dependent on others, withdraw socially, or turn to addictive behaviors to numb their pain.

Some people experience depression without recognizing it. Symptoms and behaviors vary widely, and in severe cases depression can lead to suicidal thoughts or actions. Women are diagnosed with depression more often than men.

Depression can have many contributing causes, including genetics, changes in brain chemistry, medications, medical conditions, and avalanches of stressful events.

Neglecting physical health can also contribute. Bipolar disorder has a strong genetic component.

Depression can run in families. Changes in brain chemistry may play a role, and many prescription medications list depression as a possible side effect.¹

Medical conditions associated with depressive symptoms include thyroid disorders, heart disease, multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, and Huntington's disease.

Other possible contributors include stroke, vitamin B12 deficiency, disorders of the parathyroid or adrenal glands, lupus, mononucleosis, hepatitis, HIV, and cancer. Seasonal affective disorder is depression associated with seasonal changes, often during periods of reduced daylight.

When perceived threats are long-lasting, as during the COVID-19 pandemic, their effects on the body and brain can also linger.

Studies suggest that significant losses during childhood can have lasting effects and may increase vulnerability to depression later in life.

Insufficient sleep, lack of exercise, and an unhealthy diet can also contribute to paralyzing emotional pain.

Depression can make it difficult to feel or believe that God is good to you. In Scripture, Job, Moses, David, Elijah, Jeremiah, Paul, and Jesus in Gethsemane experienced profound anguish, discouragement, or sorrow.

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 may wrongly assume they should never struggle with depression. A depressed believer is no more necessarily unspiritual than a believer 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 and eventually produce yellow wax beans. She knows very well that all sorts of forces oppose the fulfillment of her dream.

Fungal and insect attacks threaten. So do drought and raiding rodents or deer. Any of them could utterly crush her confident expectations. Nevertheless, she plants the seed in hope!

Hope is fading in the USA. Average life expectancy dropped for three consecutive years because of suicide and drug- and alcohol-related deaths.¹ COVID-19 dropped it still further.

It’s not far-fetched to attribute some of the decline to hopelessness. Suicide is a leading cause of death among young people. It can represent surrender to hopelessness.²

People sometimes turn to alcohol and drugs to anesthetize their pain and escape the tyranny of hopelessness. More than 100,000 people died from drug overdoses in the U.S. in 2021.³ 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 trust in the LORD renew their strength, soar like eagles, and move forward without growing weary (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 the bridge between hopelessness and hope for you?

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 hitting a building. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted lives and shattered hopes.

I'd hoped the economy would continue to smile on my pension fund. That didn't work out well initially. But 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. Visibility ahead was limited. 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 barrier of death.

Have you discovered a hope without an expiration date? It crosses the seemingly immovable barrier of death effortlessly.

Financial woes, unexpected unemployment, and shelter-in-place orders can't destroy it. It's a living hope, anchored in the living, resurrected Jesus Christ.

It floods your soul when you're born again. It's not wishful thinking. Anchored in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it's a confident expectation—being fully persuaded that 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 demonstrate it extravagantly today? Read 1 Peter 4.

227 Escaping Quicksand Sadness

Quicksand is dangerous! You need God's help to stop replaying the mental tapes of offenses and failures.

Release comes from forgiving others and yourself. Allowing anger or guilt to lodge in your heart will, like decaying fish, quickly stink up the whole place.

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 may 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 offenses and failures. Think about what's good, positive, and just (Philippians 4:8).

You can accomplish more with a positive attitude ("I can do this") than with a negative one. 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. The support and input of others can help identify and correct your self-defeating thinking. That's how God's church should work (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

Life's joy bells lose their clapper when you're in the quicksand. Nevertheless, choosing to do one or two things each day that formerly gave you joy may help you begin to enjoy them again. If the quicksand is especially deep and unyielding, professional help, including medication when appropriate, may be necessary.

When you're sad and unmotivated, it's easy to neglect yourself physically. Resist that urge. Pursue a healthy diet and adequate sleep. Get some sunshine and regular physical exercise. Exercise can improve your energy and mood.

Discouragement can be your knee-jerk reaction to prolonged days on Mount Adversity. But embrace the bigger picture. James wrote that trials test your faith and develop perseverance (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 favor by being kind despite difficulties. Expressing gratitude, love, and generosity toward others can also lift your spirits.

Trusting God lifts your mind from the pit to the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). Knowing God's strength and provision in all circumstances, Paul learned to be content with much or little (Philippians 4:11–13, 19).

You can pray in the pit with palms down to symbolize releasing your burdens. Then turn your palms up to symbolize receiving God's enabling grace. Try it!

For the next 30 days, refuse to replay the mental tapes of your own 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, so I don't try. I joke that given a 1,000-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 want to badly enough yet to snip the 't from can't.

Persistence and confidence intertwine to solve problems and accomplish 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 broken things.

Persistence is good. Having someone you trust help you double-team every problem is better.

People you trust 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!" Best of all is, "I'll be with you and help you do it!"

Eighteen times in Scripture, God says 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

Resources to Serve Others

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 and used it for my 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 at the same moment lightning strikes you 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. We

naturally have an almost irresistible urge to take what belongs to God—our bodies—and use them for our own purposes.

There's another, more subtle and more serious way of stealing from God. I'm not proud to admit it: I've stolen God's glory too.

I've taken credit for God's work through me—"Good sermon, preacher!" I haven't always given credit where it's due.

I've repeated the sin of Moses and Aaron. God produced water for the Israelites from a rock in the wilderness, but Moses and Aaron took personal credit for the miracle (Numbers 20:10).

Stealing God's glory isn't a small infraction. "I am 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 have purchased objects worth thousands of dollars for a few bucks. Paul describes the best deal of all in 2 Corinthians 5:14–21.

Jesus sacrificed His life to erase your sins and credit His righteousness to your account. Both transactions are essential. 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.

You don't deserve this greatest of all deals. No one does. 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.

Through the cross, God reconciled you to Himself and removed that Mount Everest barrier. He unloaded the Mount Manure of your sins on Jesus at the cross. Its peak soared far above the clouds.

God credits His righteousness to your account. God's undeserved favor, received through faith, reconciled you to Him. He has recruited you to join Him in reconciling other rebels and building them up in the faith so they, in turn, can 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 continually 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. Yet 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 function fully.

If you don't develop your gift 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.

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). Your assignment is to develop and use your gift(s).

Timothy knew God's gift to him. Do you know yours? He had to overcome his natural fear. He had to fan the glowing coals of his gift into full flame.

If you're following Jesus, you have 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 your gift. Whatever your gift, you must depend on God's power, love, and self-discipline so that 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 Swatara Church of God ministry team that went to Mississippi to repair homes damaged by Hurricane Katrina.

I contributed, but I would've been more valuable if I'd had 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 many skills.

He also appointed Oholiab to help him and 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 those skills to serve others through you.

Initially, 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 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 internet resources to believers in developed and developing countries.

How can God use your skills to build His Kingdom? What additional skills can you develop? Read 1 John 2.

233 How to Give Diamonds

At Christmas, you don’t give everyone diamonds. You can’t afford to. Instead, you give gifts 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 especially valuable. How so?

God has given you one or more gifts 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, the church, by cleaning tables, helping in the kitchen, teaching a class, or visiting the homebound.

But I bless and build up Christ’s body best by using the spiritual gift(s) God gave me. My chief gift is writing that explains and applies spiritual truths for the benefit of others.

What’s your chief gift? If you don’t know, I recommend taking a spiritual gifts inventory. [Spiritual Gifts | FREE Spiritual Gifts Survey | Assessment, Analysis, Test.](#)

Then, through trial and error, identify and give your best gift(s). 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 shoes to change your stride. They’re not easily removed. He wants your attention.

He’s not happy with the way you’ve been walking! His stones use pain to motivate you to consider changing how you live.

Jonah's stone was a storm and a huge fish (Jonah 1:4, 17). The Apostle Paul's irritant was blindness (Acts 9:8).

The Apostle Peter's stone 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 whispering through 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 yet equipped to communicate it!

At twenty-one, I wouldn't have written the same blog posts I write at seventy. An assortment of stones has significantly shaped me.

God might allow you to lose a job because He's sending you in a new direction. He may allow you to experience physical or emotional pain.

These experiences soften your heart, making you more compassionate toward others. God puts stones in your shoes 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 has been 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 overflow with thankfulness (Colossians 2:7). His gracious work is invisible to the self-absorbed.

To the worshiper who admires God, 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 that 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 blessings.

You'll have to give an account of how you use the talents and spiritual gifts God has given you. Your ministry is either serving God or equipping His servants (Ephesians 4:11–12).

You have at least one gift to use in ministering to others (1 Peter 4:10). Equippers help you discover your spiritual gifts, temperament, and spiritual passion.

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 Christlike in you, love God with all your being, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Are you taking advantage of church-provided opportunities 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 seeking first God's kingdom and righteousness?

Your resources include your

Body

Training

Positions

Skills

Wisdom

The Holy Spirit

God's Word

Family

Possessions

Influence

Knowledge

Words

Relationships

Freedom.

Make God the pie plate of your life, not just a single slice of the pie.

All of life, not just part of it, is to glorify Him.

How are you using your resources to glorify God? 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 it in about three minutes. Explain your values before you met Christ, how you came to know Him, and the difference He has made in your life.

You'll have to explain how you used the earth's natural resources. The earth and everything in it belong 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. Stewardship of the earth 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” commands of Scripture direct those relationships.

They include washing one another's feet (John 13:14); loving one another (John 13:34–35); and 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); and no longer passing judgment on one another (Romans 14:13).

Accepting one another as Christ accepted you (Romans 15:7); instructing one another (Romans 15:14); and 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); and 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); and 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); and spurring one another on toward 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 continue doing good through your will.

Have you discovered the joy of generosity? People need your help. Jesus warned that gaining the entire world is worthless if you lose your soul (Mark 8:36). Use your money wisely. It's a wonderful servant but a terrible master.

Which "one another" or "each other" command needs your attention most 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 I'll never personally meet on Earth.

Blogs I've posted and boosted on Facebook in the Philippines, various African nations, and India have reached more than 50 million people. More than five million people have engaged with them.

More than 40,000 people have shared them with their Facebook friends. I estimate that those shares have reached more than ten million additional people.

Do you see what I see? Do you envision God using you to help people you may never meet on Earth? You can touch more people than you can imagine.

You can do it through second- and third-order influence. In Jesus' name, you can strengthen, equip, and motivate people.

They, in turn, will help others, who will help still others. It can start today by offering a listening ear and some encouraging words to someone who is hurting.

“Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7 NIV).

God gifts you to strengthen His worldwide church. May your vision extend 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 about 50 years ago.

My primary responsibility was to sell tires, batteries, oil changes, and accessories. Our best salespeople either intentionally deceived customers or wouldn't take "no" for an answer. Neither tactic appealed to me. I sold enough to remain employed.

By contrast, consider my first day 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. The people in the pews are enthusiastic about something. However, most aren't excited about their relationship with God.

Blahs-ianity is passionate spirituality's chief competitor. Half-hearted Christians might do and say the "right things" but without passion. That angers 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 don't apply anything they hear.

They possess a one- or two-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 his math homework. He just had to sign his name and write 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 often messes that up during the first few days of every new year! On the other hand, the “nine” on his paper looked like the victim of a head-on collision with an 18-wheeler.

I asked him to erase his name and the date and write them more clearly. He did a much better job on the second attempt.

It's not about being perfect. I've struggled with perfectionism for much of my life. I've taken great pains—and given them to others!

Underneath perfectionism is often the perceived need to be perfect so others will 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, your motivation should be 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

Discover Your Purpose

“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 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 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 rather than their own. Why? Because minding your own business is far from praiseworthy.

It's the essence of the 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 save the 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 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 as Barnabas did, follow Jesus as Timothy did, and disciple others as Paul did.

Would life be better or worse if everyone 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 started a wildfire. His sacrificial example influenced others, who influenced still others. That unbroken chain of influence continues today.

Your encouragement can lubricate the church's machinery. It can make the church hum as all its parts work together smoothly. Your words can lift others' spirits.

The church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch, where Gentiles were becoming believers (Acts 11:22–24). Barnabas dumped an oxcart of encouragement on both the missionaries and the converts.

Its sweet fragrance has lingered for 2,000 years. As a result of Barnabas' encouragement, they shared the gospel even more vigorously. The number of converts multiplied.

You lift others by believing in them and in what they can accomplish for God. That assures them that 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 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 on winning.

Only one person can win. But everyone can improve. Improvement is achievable when winning often isn't.

Encourage and pray for your spiritual leaders. They battle frustration. They often feel that their efforts are fruitless and useless.

Give them pedal-to-the-metal esteem (1 Thessalonians 5:13). Send them a note. Tell them how their ministry has blessed you.

That can motivate them more than you can imagine. Like the apples in a seed, you can't calculate the good you can do through encouragement!

Encourage one of your spiritual leaders by telling that person how he or she 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 didn't yield to Him.

Those who are superficially attached to Jesus don't do what He says. That's a dangerous position—Judas Iscariot's position. Obeying Jesus' teachings is the first mark of being His follower.

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 imperfect people. 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 devoted disciple, Jesus thinks through your mind and loves through your heart.

He speaks through your voice and helps with your hands. Jesus is the needle, and you are 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.

The measure of a church's health is what its members do with their faith in the world. Church health improves as personal spiritual growth continues.

The Twelve learned to follow Jesus by living with Him for several years. Timothy learned to follow Jesus through one-on-one contact with Paul. Small groups build disciples best when devoted followers of Jesus lead them.

That's what made the difference for me and countless others. A small group of graduate students lit our spiritual candles at Penn State University in 1974 from Blair Cook's flame. The secret of discipleship is finding a flame and getting close to it.

What spiritual leader can you 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.

The Apostle Paul poured his life into faithful, trustworthy people. They passed the faith on unchanged to us and to 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 193,000 small churches. Many of these churches are among the most unreached people groups on earth.

TTI teaches that disciples of Christ make disciples who do the same. Churches should plant churches. Leaders should develop more leaders.

Their training materials equip people to make disciples without formal theological training

(<https://www.ttionline.org>). <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 influence incredibly. You can make more of a difference than you can imagine.

In 1956, a student at San Diego State shared the difference Jesus had 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 was scared when he gave the speech.

But he was aware that 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 the students he'd won and disciplined. They, in turn, had won and disciplined more than one thousand others to follow Christ.

Many became missionaries, 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, fishing in Glendale Lake.

I foolishly didn't return to my vehicle until well after sunset. I had no flashlight or other light source. That experience is my mental image of pitch-black darkness.

I couldn't see the trees as I inched back to my vehicle. I waved my fishing rod slowly back and forth ahead of me, feeling 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 see the world as it really is.

Disobediently and 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 being in control while, ironically, in the grasp of shadowy world powers. The spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms controlled you (Ephesians 6:12).

But the Christmas Light that shines forever has given 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 those living in darkness and the shadow of death, guiding them 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 so that you could turn from darkness to light and from Satan's power to God, to forgive your sins and give you a place among those sanctified by faith in Him (Acts 26:18). That's His gift to you.

It's wrapped in love and stained with His blood. After you receive it, your gift to Him is to leave the fruitless deeds of darkness behind

(Ephesians 5:11) and declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful 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-Out

I told her to go all out before the high school district competition started. I didn't care if the discus landed outside the boundary lines. I urged her to give it everything she had.

Throwing outside the boundary lines had been a problem throughout the season. Fear of fouling often hindered her from letting it all go.

She was ranked eleventh among fourteen discus throwers who qualified for the district championship. She went all out on all six of her throws. She achieved a personal-best throw and finished fourth.

To accomplish God's purpose, go 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 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 dove for the finish line!

Your Coach gives you 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 out for Jesus. If necessary, dive for the finish line!

What will you do today to elevate your spiritual passion and develop a pedal-to-the-metal attitude? Read Revelation 7.

246 Ultimate Investing

We invest in and photograph what we value. In the United States, we spend about \$233,610 on each child by age 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 what 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 people who are, at best, semi-lovable (just like you!).

He gave His one and only Son to bless you. He also channels His love through His 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, I sought 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 U.S. Olympic track and field team. That wasn't realistic, much like the dreams of thousands of high school football players who want to play in the NFL.

The NFL Players Association calculates that only one in five hundred will make it. Fewer than one in 8,500 high school track athletes make the U.S. Olympic team.

Chasing my dreams didn't deliver the satisfaction I imagined. Becoming a follower of Jesus did.

I changed my focus 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 may not 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 these 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.

“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! It’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 uniquely equipped you to serve Him and others.

Discovering it is a process. Let me suggest eleven practical questions 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 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 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

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- 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 serve God and others?
- Education – How can God use my education to serve Him and others?

What is your unique purpose? Read Revelation 10.

250 The Validity of Testimony

You can't prove the truth of Christianity using the scientific method. That's like trying to eat tomato soup with a fork.

The scientific method can't prove that 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 the assassination didn't occur.

You establish historical facts by weighing the testimony of dependable witnesses. You use methods similar to those used in legal proceedings.

Let's assume ten people testify that they saw Sam Citizen shoot and kill Wesley Wallpaper. Their testimony could put Sam's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

Similarly, the changed lives of hundreds of millions of believers provide testimony to how God has transformed people throughout history.

A critic of all religious practices responded negatively to one of my blog posts. I sent him my written testimony about how God has changed my life and given me purpose. It takes about three minutes to read.

The critic responded: "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 evidence from my own life of how God—whom that individual denies even exists—changed me.

Consider the weight of the testimony of hundreds of millions of believers in Jesus whose lives He has 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 person's testimony isn't necessarily a "meaningless anecdotal story that proves absolutely nothing." Acts 22 records the Apostle Paul's testimony.

To help you write your testimony, click:

<https://www.christiangrowthresources.com/31-steps-toward-spiritual-maturity> and go to p.190. Read Revelation 12.

Chapter 26

Resources 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 a vice president of his company. His friend said he expected there was even a vice president of beans at the supermarket. The bragger thought that was crazy.

He called the local store and asked to speak to the vice president of beans. The response was, “Fresh, canned, dried, or frozen?” That didn’t happen. But if it had, 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 that few, if any, had done so.

Everyone's business is no one's business. The leader must assign responsibility to someone to develop strategies by the next meeting.

Most organizations need many leaders committed to their missions. Each is responsible for accomplishing a specific aspect of the mission.

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 people to oversee twelve army divisions (1 Chronicles 27:2–15). Each of Israel's tribes also had a leader (vv. 16–22).

King David selected twelve overseers to manage his property. That included the royal storehouses and the storehouses in the outlying districts. They oversaw the workers who farmed the land, as well as the vineyards and their produce.

They also oversaw his olive and sycamore fig trees and olive oil, along with his herds grazing in Sharon and the valleys, his camels, donkeys, and flocks (vv. 25–31). Someone must oversee each task with a deadline for completion.

Suppose you are in charge of a meeting of six people. You must accomplish two major tasks by the next meeting. What is your strategy?

Read Revelation 13.

252 Red and Yellow Child Discipline Principle

I had a conversation about school bus discipline with a friend who 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 whom school officials had banned from riding the bus because of unruly behavior. She had a bottom-line discipline principle.

First came a warning. Then, running the “red light” of expected behavior always produced unpleasant consequences.

First, she clearly explained the behavioral rules and expectations. She didn’t argue with or yell at students who broke those rules. She acted.

Students who broke 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 immediately called their parents to pick them up. The bus-riding ban continued.

On her bus, persistently misbehaving elementary students received tokens. Those 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 that traffic must soon stop. A red light signals that all cars must halt.

The penalty for not stopping is a fine and three demerit points in Pennsylvania. 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 bring unpleasant consequences tailored to each misbehaving child.

What consequences did your childhood misbehaviors bring? 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 decision has helped me get more from my Bible reading.

In 2015, I decided to have a mole on my left cheek checked. That decision might have saved me from a premature death from melanoma.

After her husband died unexpectedly, Ruth decided to accompany her mother-in-law, Naomi, back to Bethlehem rather than remain in Moab, her homeland.

There, she followed Naomi's advice and let Boaz know that he could be her kinsman-redeemer.

She married him and became a great-grandmother of King David (Ruth 3–4) and an ancestor of Jesus Christ.

Little decisions can make a big difference. Before making them, it's wise to seek God, learn the facts, and ask for advice.

Ask God for wisdom and trust Him to direct you (James 1:5; Proverbs 3:5–6).

Get the facts before deciding. Wise people base their choices on knowledge (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 at school. When 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 strengthens relational ties, especially if that person supports you.

That's the "CARE Principle." C stands for crisis, A for assistance, R for relationship, and E for enhancement.

Crisis assistance enhances relationships and builds trust. The CARE Principle fortifies friendships. It's also an effective way to build relationships with those who don't yet know Jesus.

Crisis intervention usually includes relieving pain. You do it because you care. Some people 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 turned 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 and 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 an opportunity to tell them that Jesus is the ultimate source of help and how they can know Him too (Matthew 5:16).

How can you and your church's ministry benefit from the CARE Principle? Read Revelation 16.

255 The Parable of the Celery Farmer

Once upon a time, a celery farmer planned a long journey. He didn't know when he'd return. He put a hired hand in charge of his celery farm.

“When I return, you must tell me 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. Pulling weeds never stopped. He sweated under the blazing summer sun. His hands felt like ice blocks when he processed celery in late fall and early winter.

He harvested 35,000 pounds per acre. But he concluded that raising celery was too hard. The celery farmer still hadn’t returned.

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 wishes clear before he left. More and better celery was what mattered to him. More and better anything else was no substitute for more and better celery. He fired the hired hand on the spot.

Churches often use offerings and attendance as measures of success. They're not bad things. But increasing 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," Bill said.

"I know what you did every second of your life," said the Lord. "Show Me your disciples."

"I often helped at the food bank," Bill said, "and we fed many people."

"Feeding people should have been part of making disciples," said the Lord. "Show Me your disciples."

"I gave generously every Sunday," Bill said.

"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 doing your part in the disciple-making task.

Feeding people was a caring bridge. It gained their trust and led them toward faith and spiritual maturity. Giving was a natural response to all I’ve given you. Part of giving should’ve been sharing with others 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 you’ve influenced to make Jesus the hub of their lives. Show Me your disciples.”

That scenario is convicting. When you’re a superficial Christian, you’re blind to your purpose. Thinking you’re saved simply 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, discipleship, and 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

Distraction can kill. Holli Platt said she forgot her baby in a hot car in Arizona after her other three children, excited to buy things, distracted her. Fortunately, the baby lived.¹

Distracted driving includes driving while using electronic devices. About 58 percent of teens involved in accidents are texting. Between 2015 and 2018, 14,730 people died in the USA because of distracted driving.²

Go to a restaurant and observe how distraction is more the rule than the exception. A family eats dinner without conversation. All eyes are glued to phones. No one is fully present.

My wife may ask me to do a chore. Then something else grabs my attention, and I forget about it.

Others interpret my distraction as untrustworthiness because I fail to do what I promised. 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 before the Israelites conquered the Promised Land (Numbers 32:33).

He charged them with helping the other tribes acquire 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 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 pay in full before they start a job, yet 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 a first impression. But you have many chances to make a last impression. A last impression is often more accurate and realistic.

First impressions can be misleading. Not every glittering stone is a diamond.

I conducted the funeral service for a man who didn't attend church. He was highly esteemed in town.

Five minutes before the service began, his daughter angrily blurted out, "I don't want you to say he was a nice man!"

After his death, she went through his belongings and found letters from other women. She discovered that her father had been unfaithful to her mother.

Courtships usually begin with mutual five-star first impressions. Weeks, months, or years later, they can end in 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 by making only four of his first eleven field-goal attempts. That wasn't stellar! He finished the season by 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 of Saul (later Paul) was that he threatened their very existence (Acts 8:3). He breathed out murderous threats against them (Acts 9:1). Today, he's considered one of the greatest missionaries of all time.

A good last impression is better than a good first one. One final impression matters most—God 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 inclined to conserve energy. They expend as little energy as possible while consuming as many calories as possible.

Cows don't run laps around the pasture! Fish don't compete in races. It's a remarkably successful, prewired survival strategy.

Alligators, fish, cats, pigs, dogs, and other creatures follow it. Doing so helps them survive and reproduce after their kind. That's their purpose.

Laziness is in your genes. Fight 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 like a resting cow than a diligent ant. You tend to watch work rather than do it. You prefer to rest before you get tired rather than afterward.

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).

Hebrews 6:12 implies that the lazy won't inherit what God has promised. You see the same truth in Matthew 25:26–30.

The master described the servant who did nothing with the resources entrusted to him as lazy and worthless. He condemned him to darkness, where there would be 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 freedom from 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 tries to squeeze every drop of enjoyment from life's sponge before the road ends. It sniffs all the flowers. It picks all the berries along a 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 would merge seamlessly into your first day of forever? It will. Are you prepared for life beyond the grave?

Jesus links your eternal destiny with how you respond to the needs of others during your earthly existence (Matthew 25:31–46). Those who minister to others will receive an inheritance prepared for them since the creation of the world (Matthew 25:34).

They serve the lowly and least on earth. In doing so, 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). Saving faith in Christ 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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