

THERE MUST BE MORE

Lost Keys To The Christian Life



Tad Trapp

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PREFACE TO THIS EDITION

Why The Do-Over?

The substance of this book was published a few years ago under another name, but friends encouraged me to issue a new edition. For starters, it needed a title that was a bit more “user friendly.”¹ Other changes include footnotes which will allow readers to track down my sources (most of these old books can be found in their entirety on websites like archive.org, openlibrary.org, or guttenberg.org). I also updated information on friends mentioned in the book. A lot of wonderful things have happened since the first edition (see testimonies at the "Refuge Narratives" channel on YouTube).

To those who *want more*, the views of the old schoolers (born-again Christians from about 1720-1920) may seem strange, but please listen to them with an open mind and heart. If these supercharged saints—like D.L. Moody, George Müller, or Amy Carmichael—were still here, they would be the first to tell you that they experienced the power and glory of God because of these "strange" views. I mention this up front because so many young Christians want to see what the old schoolers saw but then refuse to budge when challenged on things like prayer, the Holy Spirit, or spiritual

¹ The book was formerly titled, *Discipleship Basics: With Help from the Old School*, ©2019.

warfare. The point of this book is to encourage you, reader, to rediscover the lost keys, pick them up, and use them. *To be as clear as I can, the "strange" views of the old schoolers are the lost keys we so desperately need if God is going to move again in power in His Church!*

In addition to the changes mentioned above, my wife suggested I give some book recommendations for those interested in getting better acquainted with the old schoolers—those incredible Christians from the not-so-distant past who fill the coming pages. I could recommend hundreds of books, but what follows is a sampling.

1. R.A. Torrey. *Why God used D.L. Moody*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1923. Moody (1837-99) is one of my all-time favorite old schoolers, and not just because he led one million people to Christ (yes, you read that right). Every page of this short little work is like an arrow to the heart. It was written by Moody's protégé and close friend R.A. Torrey, who himself was a world-shaker (and penned over 40 books). These pages emphasize keys that will revolutionize the hungry disciple's life—like complete surrender, believing prayer, and the empowering of the Holy Spirit. Torrey says in no uncertain terms that these are the things that explain Moody's astonishing life.

God does not give His power arbitrarily. It is true that He gives it to whomsoever He will, but He wills to give it on certain conditions, which are clearly revealed in His Word, and D.L. Moody met those conditions and God made him the most wonderful preacher of his generation; yes, I think the most wonderful man of his generation.
(page 7)

2. Andrew Murray. *The Ministry of Intercession*. London: James Nisbet & Co., 1898. Murray (1828-1917) was a highly respected Dutch Reformed minister in South Africa who also wrote over 40 books. This work is the follow-up to his classic, *With Christ in the School of Prayer* (1885). Murray's views may be a shock to the system for the uninitiated, but they are pretty typical of the old schoolers. They all prayed, expecting God to move ... and God moved! Murray explains,

I was led to show how prayer can be used to enter into the mind of God ... and bring down to earth what without prayer would not have been given. It is the highest proof of ... having been made in the likeness of God's Son.
(page 2)

3. John MacNeil. *The Spirit-Filled Life*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1896. MacNeil (1854-96) was a powerful minister in Australia who died relatively young. This book received high praise from influential leaders in his day like Moody and Murray. This is a great example of the old schoolers' dynamic understanding of the Holy Spirit, and further proof of how different their views were from today's version of "born-again, Bible-believing" Christianity. MacNeil says,

So many of God's dear children are living on the wrong side of Pentecost, living on the same plane as that on which the disciples were living before they "were filled with the Holy Ghost," and thus by their lives practically making the sad confession, "We did not so much as hear ... whether there be any Holy Ghost." (page 9)

4. Amy Carmichael. *From Sunrise Land*. London: Marshall Brothers, 1895. Carmichael (1867-1951) was simply amazing—fearless, on fire for Jesus, and a brilliant writer (she also published almost 40 books). She is best known for her ministry in India, rescuing little girls from temple service and prostitution. Her mission continues on today. This book covers her early endeavors in Japan and is a classic example of a (young) old schooler living it out—praying in faith, full of the Holy Spirit, battling the devil, and expecting great things from God. Below she recounts a season when she and her co-workers experienced a fresh touch from heaven.

Soon after we arrived here, we found that some were longing for a fuller consecration than they had known as yet, while others were seeking the filling of the Holy Spirit. The little meetings held morning by morning in our lodgings were very solemn, as one after another confessed failure and claimed His cleansing and deliverance. All week He kept us at the point of full surrender, but yesterday evening, a time some of us will never forget was given when He drew near, and to some extent, was given a fresh, deep sense of the gift of Pentecost. (page 49)

5. A.T. Pierson. *George Müller of Bristol*. New York: The Baker and Taylor Company, 1899. No list of the old schoolers would be complete without a reference to George Müller. All the great Christians of his era, like Moody, Murray, MacNeil, and Carmichael, greatly admired him. This work, written by another huge hitter and close friend of Müller, emphasizes the sort of mountain-moving faith that drove this man of God. Müller claimed that he intentionally put his life on display for the whole world to see so that

everyone would be clear on what is possible for the surrendered, obedient, faith-filled Christian.

To the one who asked him the secret of his service, he said: "There was a day when I died, utterly died," and, as he spoke, he bent lower and lower until he almost touched the floor—"died to George Müller, his opinions, preferences, tastes, and will—died to the world, its approval or censure—died to the approval or blame, even of my brethren and friends—and since then, I have studied only to show myself approved unto God." (page 367)

My prayer is that God would raise up an army that rediscovers the keys these old schoolers lived and died by, and that this army would pick them up and use them.

—Tad Trapp, January 2022

INTRODUCTION

New School, Meet The Old School

A few years ago, I resigned from pastoring a wonderful church to take over a ministry that focuses on training Christian leaders in developing countries. My wife and I moved to a nice little college town with a good airport, intending to make it our home base. I thought my life would be all about traveling the world ... but God had other plans. What actually happened was that an army of spiritually hungry university students began gathering around us, filling our home, filling our day timers, asking us to help them grow in their Christian faith.



Hungry disciples crowd our table for Sunday night dinner.

We didn't try to create a ministry. You could say it was sort of a "perfect storm"—the lessons we had learned over the last twenty-five years of ministry in the U.S. and abroad just happened to be the things that these hungry young disciples of Jesus wanted to know.¹

What is it that this little army was so hungry for? Well, let's put it right out there on the table—it's a slightly different approach to the Christian life. I am not talking about a different Bible or a different gospel, but some significantly different ways of understanding things like prayer, spiritual warfare, and even God Himself. So just a heads-up to the "already Christian" reader—some of what you will be encountering in the coming pages may be new to you, but the fact is that it isn't really new at all. Most of it is simply the way Christians used to see things a century or more ago. I like to think of it as forgotten wisdom, it's the old school way.

I first discovered the old schoolers years ago when I was in Bible college, and to this day (three theological degrees later), I find them much more compelling than the vast majority of Christians in our time. I am talking about world-shakers like John Wesley (1703-1791), George Whitefield (1714-1770), Charles Finney (1792-1875), William Booth (1829-1912), Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892), D.L. Moody (1837-1899), R.A. Torrey (1856-1928), George Müller (1805-1898), Andrew Murray (1828-1917), Oswald Chambers (1874-1917), and latecomers like Martin Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981) and Leonard Ravenhill (1907-1994).

¹ Since the first edition of this book, we started The Refuge Fellowship Church (www.therefugefellowshipchurch.com). When people ask about its history I tell them, *We are just a discipleship ministry that got out of control.*

The old schoolers certainly have differences of opinion among themselves (some were Calvinists, some Arminians, some traditional high churchmen, some low, some were dispensationalists, some not, etc.). My interest lies in those areas where they share a profound agreement on spiritual realities (*keys*) that many Christians in our time have lost. This is where hungry disciples today can benefit the most. I will refer to the old schoolers for support, especially on points where I know today's readers may need some extra convincing—like the discussion in Chapter 4 on prayer or Chapter 5 on receiving the empowering of the Holy Spirit.

The content of this book is largely driven by conversations I find myself having again and again with young believers. They all seem to be interested in answering the same questions:

How can I know I am really saved? (Ch. 1)

Can God use me if I don't know the Bible well? (Ch. 2)

How do I keep from falling into sin? (Ch. 3)

How do I pray in a way that really works? (Ch. 4)

How do I experience the Holy Spirit's power? (Ch. 5)

Can Satan torment me if I am a Christian? (Ch. 6)

How can I know when God is speaking to me? (Ch. 7)

Do all Christians need to care about the poor? (Ch. 8)

How do I make sense of the suffering in my life? (Ch. 9)

How can I know God more intimately? (Ch. 10)

In the coming pages, I will regularly be drawing on three lines of argument. First, I want to back up everything I say with Scripture. The Bible is absolute bedrock for anything

and everything a truly born-again Christian believes about God and His dealings with us. Second, when necessary I will appeal to those amazing old schoolers of past centuries, like Moody, Murray, and Müller. When I was a young Christian, these powerhouses challenged many of my naïve assumptions about God and ministry. Third, every chapter will begin with the testimony of a friend of mine whose life was transformed by the lost key being discussed.

So why the last line of evidence, the personal touch, the testimony of some real-life person I know? Because it's my belief that good theology should make a powerful impact in the real world. It should have the power (Gk. *dunamis*) of God on it. Another way of saying this is that if our religion and theology don't actually work, they probably aren't true. I think this was basically what the apostle Paul was saying when he wrote:

The kingdom of God is not just about talk. It's about power. (1 Corinthians 4:20)

What follows is not just theory. Does it have good biblical support? Yes. Is it backed up by some of the biggest guns in Christian history? Yes. And does it work? Absolutely.

1

KEY ONE: TRUE SALVATION

How can I know that I am really saved?

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street ... About a quarter past nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone for my salvation; and an assurance was given me, that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death. —John Wesley (1703-1791)¹

Unless a man is born again, he will not see the kingdom of heaven. (John 3:3)

JASON FACES JESUS

Jason was a junior at the university and by all accounts a serious, committed follower of Jesus. He accepted Christ at a young age, was raised in a strong Christian home, and when I met him, he was very involved in a campus ministry. He spent regular time in the Word and prayer, led Bible studies, and even went on overseas mission trips. Jason

¹ Entry from *John Wesley's Journal*, May 24, 1738.

wanted to be pushed spiritually, so he asked if I would consider discipling him. We agreed to meet up at a local coffee shop to explore the possibility.

We were sipping our coffee outside on a beautiful sunny day, and I dropped the bomb—the big question. If he didn't answer this correctly, there would be no point in trying to disciple him. *Have you decided to truly make Jesus the Lord of your life?* I asked him. I needed to know if Jason really understood what the Bible means when it says, *If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord ... you will be saved (Romans 10:9).*² I asked him pointedly, *Does Jesus get the final say over every area of your life—who you date, who you marry, who your friends are, where you live, what your job should be?* He paused.

As we talked a little more, it became clear that (once again) here was someone who believed he was a committed Christian, but who had missed one of the most fundamental elements of the gospel. Many people have prayed a “sinner’s prayer,” been baptized, attend church, and are involved in ministry (some even become pastors and missionaries), yet they have never made a conscious decision to allow Jesus to rule and reign over *every* aspect of their life. This is a massive problem because, whether they know it or not, if Jesus isn't their Lord, then they themselves are the lord and master of their own lives.

² In the New Testament, saying “Jesus is Lord” (Gk. *kurios*) means that you have submitted in obedience to Him. When a person rightly understands this, there is a word they will apply to themselves (the first disciples all did)—the word is “slave” (Gk. *doulos*). If Jesus is your *kurios*, then you are His *doulos* (*Acts 4:29; Romans 1:1, 6:16; 1 Corinthians 7:22; Galatians 1:10; etc.*). To miss this point is to miss a huge part of the gospel.

Here is a news flash—if you have not accepted Jesus Christ as Savior *and* surrendered to Him as Lord, you very well may be an outsider looking in.³ This is one reason that so many “Christians” in our day have such a substandard spiritual experience. Their “Christianity” simply doesn’t work. God seems distant, the Bible is boring, and their prayers seem to bounce right off the ceiling. This state of affairs leads many to the wrongheaded conclusion that there is something deficient with Christianity itself. The truth is that the problem isn’t with Christianity at all, the problem is with *them*. They have never come to God on the terms that He laid out in Scripture. So before we move on to all the exciting things available to God’s born-again kids, let’s make sure that you, reader, are really on the team.

(By the way, Jason took a week or so to think it over and decided to surrender fully to Jesus. Needless to say, he hasn’t regretted it. He is now discipling others and developing the skills to be a real player in God’s kingdom.)⁴

ME, DECEIVED? NEVER!

Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith. Examine yourself. (2 Corinthians 13:5)

³ This point is very troubling for many “Christians,” who will inevitably ask, *Are you saying that Jason was not born again?* I am not making any sort of judgment on the matter—I am just reporting what the Bible says. *Anyone interested in getting to the bottom of this, ask Jason.*

⁴ The first edition of this book was written three years ago, and a lot has happened in Jason’s life since then. He is a founding member and deacon of our new church, The Refuge Fellowship. He completed a seminary degree in theology, and now oversees our church’s discipleship house ministry. He also married a wonderful, godly young woman, and they just had their first child.

According to Jesus, judgment day is going to be a huge shock for many people. Thousands upon thousands of religious folks who sincerely think that they are Christians (“born again,” “saved”) are going to be turned away. With tears in His eyes, Jesus will tell them that they were deceived—they thought they were His, but they were not.

Many will say to Me on that day, “Lord, Lord, didn’t we prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name do many miracles?” And then I will say to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.” (Matthew 7:22-23)

The sad fact is that many people who think they are Christians will read that passage of Scripture and say to themselves, *I’m sure glad that Jesus isn’t going to say that to me. I know I got it right.* But how do we know if we got it right? No one who is deceived knows that they are deceived. That’s the thing about deception—it deceives you. It would be a much more intelligent move on our part to say, *Maybe, just maybe, I am one of those deceived people, so I better check it out.* This is precisely why the apostle tells the believers in Corinth to test themselves to see if they are truly in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5). It is vital that we line up our idea of salvation with the New Testament. Do you know for certain that you have come to God on *His* terms?

THE MESSAGE AND THE MIRACLE

One of the greatest moves of God in all of history erupted in the 1700s, when a few young firebrands rediscovered the truth of salvation. This explosion of God’s power has come to be known as The First Great Awakening, and the main movers and shakers of that time were John Wesley (1703-

1791) and his good friend George Whitefield (1714-1770). This kicked off about 200 years of God moving in power on planet earth. Yet today, most Christians know almost nothing about this era. For over two centuries, these old schoolers lit up towns, cities, and sometimes whole countries with fire from heaven.⁵

If you want to have your hair blown back, read the journals of those who experienced the glory, beginning with Wesley and Whitefield. In their case, it looks like a couple of apostles, like Peter and Paul, were dropped into eighteenth-century England and colonial America. The following is a sample from Whitefield's journal:

When my friends were sitting down together, finding the power of the Lord come upon me, I began to speak to them of the things of God. A great alteration was soon discernable in most of the company; their concern gradually increased, till many burst into floods of tears, and one fell upon the ground ... My soul was carried, as it were, out of the body, and I was enabled to wrestle mightily with the Lord in their behalf—He did not let us go without a blessing. The room was filled with cries of those around me, and many, I believe, at that time sought Jesus ... Several were in great agonies of soul, and a Cherokee Indian trader, who was providentially present

⁵ There are tens of thousands of lost and neglected books—journals, biographies, devotional writings, theological works—documenting this amazing period of history. This library can now be resurrected and searched out by anyone with a computer via websites like openlibrary.org, archive.org, and gutenberg.org.

*desired to speak with me, saying, he never saw or felt the like before.*⁶

What Wesley and Whitefield rediscovered and then unleashed on the English-speaking world was the concept that salvation is an event, *as lightning falling from heaven.*⁷ It happens in a moment. You don't need to join a particular church or take a 12-week class. It's not a process, or something you strive to attain. In the Bible, the miracle of salvation happens as soon as a person believes and receives the right message about Jesus Christ.

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name. (John 1:12)

Check it out for yourself. Salvation is a gift from God, given freely and immediately to anyone who will accept it. *What must I do to be saved?* the Philippian jailer asked the apostle. *Believe in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ,* was the simple answer (*Acts 16:30-31*).

Having said that, there are some very specific things you absolutely must believe if that amazing lightning strike called salvation is going to happen to you. Sadly, many

⁶ Quoted from *A Continuation of the Reverend Mr. Whitefield's Journal, from a few days after his return to Georgia to his arrival at Falmouth* (London: W. Strayhan, 1744), 15-16.

⁷ John Wesley used this expression to describe the immediacy of a true salvation experience. For example, his journal on April 26, 1738, reads, *In the day or two following, I was much confirmed in the "truth that is after godliness" by hearing the experiences of Mr. Hutchins, of Pembroke College, and Mrs. Fox: two living witnesses that God can ... give that faith whereof cometh salvation in a moment, as lightning falling from heaven.*

people today think they've "got it right" and they simply don't. Let's run through the New Testament to make sure we have all our ducks in a row, so to speak, so that you can know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are truly saved.

Thankfully, the New Testament makes this crystal clear. There is a very specific message that a person must believe, and when this message is rightly believed and received, a miracle happens in their soul. If you really want to know that you are saved, open up the Bible and search it out for yourself.

This is so important that you can't leave this issue of your salvation up to anyone else—not your grandma, your best friend, or even your pastor or priest. In *Matthew 24:24*, Jesus says that there will be all sorts of people talking all kinds of nonsense, claiming to represent Him: *False Christs and false prophets will arise ... to mislead, if possible, even the chosen ones.* Again, you need to check this out for yourself. Only when a person gets over this hurdle cleanly can they move on to all the other amazing things available to God's kids, like prayer, power, victory over the demonic, and how to hear the voice of God. But first things first—everything stands or falls on what you believe about Jesus.

“WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?”

Jesus once asked His disciples, *Who do people say that I am?* His followers filled Him in on the differing views that were swirling around.

He was asking His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you

say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:13-16)

Virtually every person you meet has an opinion about Jesus. Your philosophy professor has an opinion, the barista at the coffee shop has an opinion, and you have your own opinion. One of the most popular views going today is that Jesus was simply a great moral teacher. Another popular view (particularly in some academic circles) is that Jesus was a zealous, small-time country preacher who was wildly exaggerated by His early followers. All the major world religions have put their own unique spin on Jesus. Muslims teach that Jesus was a prophet who agreed with everything Mohammed said (and Christians distorted His message). Many Hindus believe Jesus is on par with countless other deities, or avatars. Mormons believe He is the brother of Satan. Jehovah's Witnesses believe Jesus is just a created being.

How important is our answer to this question? It's as if all of mankind will ultimately have a final exam with just one question on it—*Who do you say that I am?* That Jesus existed, or was a really great guy, or that He was even a prophet, just won't cut it. Jesus Himself says that our answer to this question is a matter of life and death. Get it right and you win. Get it wrong and you die—not once, but twice (see *Revelation 21:8*). As Jesus put it, *Unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins (John 8:24)*. What exactly did Jesus mean by that?

The New Testament Is Clear

Let's cut right to the chase here. According to the New Testament, Jesus is God, plain and simple. He put on human

flesh, then died on a cross to save us from our sin. This is all so obvious from the Bible itself that anyone who comes to another conclusion is simply not taking Scripture seriously.

I make known to you the gospel that I preached to you, which you also received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I gave to you as of first importance what I also received, that according to the Scriptures Christ died for our sins, and that He was buried, and that according to the Scriptures He was raised on the third day. (1 Corinthians 15:1-4)

Changing this simple message is unthinkable for anyone who really believes and follows the Bible. The harshest language in the New Testament is reserved for those who try to pervert or obscure it in any way. The apostles themselves said that no one was allowed to tweak or modify it in the slightest, not even them.

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! As we already said, so I now say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse. (Galatians 1:8-9)

Come on, someone might ask, *is it really that obvious? Isn't it possible for intelligent people to read it differently? Isn't it all just a matter of interpretation?* Let's be perfectly clear here. There may be some issues we can debate about when it comes to the Bible (the end times, spiritual gifts, mode of baptism, etc.), but **Who** Jesus is and **What** He did is not debatable. C.S. Lewis (a former agnostic turned Christian) is famous for arguing that for anyone who takes

Jesus's words at face value, there are really only a few options available—liar, lunatic, or Lord. Either He was God, or He was out of His mind.

*A man who said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on a level with the man who says He is a poached egg — or else He would be the Devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.*⁸

Most people would heartily agree that He was neither deluded nor a deceiver, so let's quickly run down those unmistakably clear things Jesus said about Himself (and that His early followers then confirmed) and consider what the implications are for us.

THE MESSAGE OF JESUS/THE MESSAGE OF SALVATION

The New Testament clearly states Jesus's identity. He was God with skin on, who came to earth to save people from their sin. He died on a cross, rose from the dead, and now sits enthroned in highest heaven as Lord and King of the universe. But to really make sense of His message, we must also believe some things about ourselves—namely, that we are sinners, worthy of God's wrath. If we put all this

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; reis., New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 51-52.

information together, the following points are what we must absolutely believe, and we will be saved.

1. We have all sinned ... *that includes you and me.*
2. Sin makes us worthy of death/separation from God ... *you sin, you die.*
3. Jesus was God in the flesh ... *even His opponents knew this was His claim.*
4. Jesus died for the sins of the world ... *this God-Man died your death for you.*
5. Jesus rose from the dead ... *this validated everything else He said.*
6. Jesus is Lord ... *miss this part, and you are still on the outside looking in.*

1. YOU ARE A SINNER

*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.
(Romans 3:23)*

Sin is defined by theologians and Bible scholars as *any act that is not in conformity (i.e., agreement) with the will of God*. In short, whenever you do something God doesn't like, you have sinned. God put a little sin detector inside every human being called the conscience, and everyone on earth, even the most wicked, knows full well that they have sinned (*Romans 1:32*).

Sometimes when I share the gospel with someone, they try to convince me that they are a "good person," and based on this premise then argue that they are okay with God. The New Testament comes right out and calls these people *deceived (1 John 1:8)*, so I try to use a little finesse at this

point to get them to abandon that futile argument. There is a technique that I employ to call their bluff ... and it has never failed yet.

Whenever someone says, *I am a good person*, I invite them to play a little imagination game with me. I say, *Pretend with me that somehow I have come into possession of a secret video. It's right here on my phone. On this video, I have a recording of your life's darkest moments—words, deeds, lies, immoral acts, every dark thought.* Then I ask them, *If I had this video, would you still be trying to convince me that you are a good person?*

If I possessed this sort of video on any human being (including you), that person would never be able to look me in the eye again ... and thank God no one has *my* video. No one has ever tried to push their, *I'm a good person*, approach beyond this point. They usually just look at me surprised. I tell them, *No, I can't see into your soul. I just know you are like all the rest of us—a sinner!* As the Bible says, *There is no one who is righteous, not even one (Romans 3:10).*

According to Scripture, if a person commits even one sin (like Adam and Eve), they are worthy of death. But the reality is that you and I have a sin rap sheet that could stretch for miles. *Isaiah 6* is an account of someone really being confronted with the state of his sick soul. The prophet basically exclaims, *In light of God's holiness, I am doomed! Doomed!* The fact is, we aren't good people. That the earth hasn't opened up and swallowed every single one of us into hell is a miracle of God's kindness (see *Psalms 130:3*). We are all in a heap of trouble. Below is the portrait the Bible paints of us:

*There is no one righteous, not even one;
There is no one who understands,*

*There is no one who seeks after God;
Everyone has turned aside, together they are useless;
There is no one who does good, there is not even one.
Their throat is an open grave,
They keep deceiving with their tongues,
Snake venom is under their lips;
Their mouth is full of cursing and bitterness;
Their feet run to shed blood,
Destruction and desolation are in their paths,
And the path of peace they have not known.
There is no fear of God before their eyes.
Now we know that everything the law says, it speaks to
those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be
shut and all the world may become accountable to God.
(Romans 3:10-19)*

Embrace this reality, that you are sick beyond any and all human remedy, and we can move on to point #2. If not, you are the deluded person who thinks they are healthy and needs no physician—these were the nuts that even Jesus Himself couldn't crack.

2. YOUR SIN MAKES YOU WORTHY OF DEATH/ SEPARATION FROM GOD

The wages of sin is death. (Romans 6:23)

In biblical terms, “death” means separation, being cut off from something or someone. We need to recognize that the sinful things we have done make us worthy of death—being cut off from God. This has always been the way things work. *The soul that sins must die (Ezekiel 18:20)*. In Genesis, God told our first parents that on the day they sinned, they would be cut off from Him. Just one little sin, and they would die (*Genesis 2:17*). We all know the story. They ate the

forbidden fruit, and they died. Now obviously they didn't drop physically dead on the spot; that is not the primary meaning of "death" in the Bible. Rather, they were cut off from God and cast out of His "Garden of Delights"—Eden.

This state of spiritual death, cut off from the presence of God, is how every single one of us comes into this world. We are born under the rule and reign of Satan, and throughout life, we only get ourselves deeper and deeper into sin and guilt by sinning and sinning and sinning. The apostle Paul explains our desperate plight.

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins ... when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air (Satan), the spirit who is now working in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature children of wrath. (Eph. 2:1-3)

According to the New Testament, we are all basically dead men and women walking. To make matters worse, there is nothing you or I can do to save ourselves. We can't do any sort of good deeds to try and fix our situation ... because we are dead. We are in a condition that we cannot remedy. We walk this world as dead people, cut off from the blessing of a relationship with God, then only have death to look forward to in eternity—the second death.

What a delusion so many of us are under. We love to think of ourselves as pretty good people, but the fact is that by nature we are all selfish, sick, twisted little monsters. We didn't just nibble a little fruit, either—we have lied, cheated, stolen ... and done straight unmentionable things. Even most of the so-called "good deeds" we attempted were ruined by our selfish or proud motives.

Anyone who doesn't understand that they are dark and twisted at the deepest level and worthy of death is living in a delusion and is just not ready for salvation. And note again that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves. Our guilt can't be undone. Our fundamental problem is this: our sinful behaviors simply flow from what we are at the deepest level. Sin is just the fruit that falls off our tree. We must die—or undergo a miracle of cosmic proportions.

But God, being rich in kindness, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our sins, made us alive together with Christ! (Eph. 2:4-5)

3. JESUS WAS GOD IN THE FLESH

We are not stoning you for any good work, but for blasphemy, because You, a mere man, claim to be God. (John 10:33)

One of the great mysteries of the Christian faith is the Trinity. There is only one God, but within that one essence we call “God,” there exist three distinct and separate Persons—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. This is not the time or place to go into an explanation or defense of the Trinity, just know that every right-thinking Christian in the history of the world has held this belief. Why? Because it is clearly taught in Scripture.

There is something else that every right-thinking Christian in the history of the world believes—Jesus Christ is the second member of this mysterious three-in-one Triune God. The Son is uncreated, all-powerful, eternal God. This means that before Jesus Christ the Son chose to become a little baby in the manger in Bethlehem, He was the all-powerful Creator of untold billions of galaxies, the Sustainer

of the universe, Ruler and Judge of all ... yet for some mind-boggling reason, He decided to take on human flesh and become a man (*Phil 2:5-10*).

If you read through the Bible, you will occasionally find people who figure out exactly who Jesus really is—God with skin on. They fall down and worship Him and He doesn't stop them. They say things like, *He is greater than I am, because He existed before me (John 1:30)*, and, *I am not worthy to untie the strap of His sandal (John 1:27)*. Sometimes they come right out and say it in a way that cannot be missed—*My Lord and my God! (John 20:28)*.

Jesus Himself made it clear (for anyone with *eyes to see*) that He was God. He said things like, *Before Abraham was born, I Am (John 8:58)*. Even His enemies knew exactly what He was doing. He was claiming to be God, and this is why they would pick up stones to kill Him. On one occasion, they left no doubt as to their complaint against Him: *You, a mere man, claim to be God (John 10:33)*.

The authors of the New Testament affirmed that Jesus was God again and again throughout their writings.

Christ Jesus ... being in very nature God, did not regard equality with God something to be held on to, but emptied Himself, taking the nature of a servant and being made in the likeness of man. (Philippians 2:5-7)

He is the image of the invisible God. (Colossians 1:15)

He (the Son) is the brightness of His (the Father's) glory and the exact representation of His nature. (Hebrews 1:3)

Let's review: 1. You are a sinner, 2. You are worthy of death, and 3. Jesus was God with skin on. Now we are all set for things to really come together. Why did God take on

human flesh? To save our helpless, hopeless, dead, eternally damned souls, of course.

4. JESUS PAID THE PENALTY OF SIN FOR THE WHOLE WORLD

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)

Read the Bible carefully from beginning to end, and it becomes perfectly clear that this was God's plan all along. God knew the mess we were going to get in before He even created us, and He had the solution all mapped out. Before the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit created the world, it was determined that the second member of the Trinity, the Son, would pay for the sins of humanity. He would be the once-for-all sacrifice, paying the penalty for all sin for all time. God announced this through His prophets centuries before Jesus's birth. Seven hundred years before Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah explained Jesus's death mission in vivid detail. (Did you catch that? This was written 700 years before Jesus was born. *Mind boggling!*)

He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our sins; the punishment that brought us peace fell on Him, and by His wounds we are healed. All of us have gone astray like sheep, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD placed on Him the sin of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth. (Isaiah 53:5-7)

This God-Man was miraculously conceived in the womb of a virgin, lived in obscurity for 30 years, then exploded onto the scene of history for three and a half short years. Why did He come? The answer is simple and clear—to die. This is why when John the Baptist first sees Jesus, he cries out, *Look, there is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world! (John 1:29)*. Jesus came to pay the penalty for your sins and mine.

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

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

He has appeared at the pinnacle moment of all history to do away with sin by the sacrifice of Himself ... Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many. (Hebrews 9:26-28)

Someone had to pay the penalty for our sin, and the Trinity had it planned out from eternity past exactly how They were going to do it. *Brilliant!* Because of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, God can now forgive us and remove the curse of death from us. On the cross, all the world's sins were placed upon Jesus, and He took death for us all.

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)

Because of what Jesus has done, not only can we have our slate wiped clean forever we also have the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ credited to our account. There

is nothing we can do to earn this or add to it. Don't try to improve on it, either. It's an accomplished fact, a gift just waiting for you to take. All we have to do is believe and receive.

Someone hearing this message for the first time might ask questions like, *How could infinite God possibly become a man? How can God die? How is it possible for one sacrifice to pay the penalty for the entire world?*

To be perfectly honest, there is a lot about this whole salvation thing I cannot understand. But think about this—I don't need to understand everything about how an airplane works before I get on one. I don't need to understand everything about brain surgery before I let a skilled doctor put the knife to me. All I need to know is that this is how God did it, and if we believe this message, a miracle happens inside of us—as *lightning falling from heaven!*

We still may have some reservations, so to really drive home the point that Jesus is who He said He is, and that He accomplished what He said He was going to accomplish, God put an exclamation point on the whole operation. The next component of the salvation message is God's final seal, His finishing touch. To confirm it all, and to let us all know in no uncertain terms that Jesus successfully accomplished our salvation, *He rose from the dead.*

5. JESUS ROSE FROM THE DEAD

Religious leaders down through the ages have made a lot of big claims, but who besides Jesus ever made a claim as big as this?

I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down by My own decision. I have

*authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.
(John 10:17-18)*

Any good historian knows that there is overwhelming evidence that the life and death of Jesus is historical fact. Even ancient non-Christian sources acknowledge this.⁹ What many people don't realize, however, is that the evidence for the *resurrection* of Jesus is also absolutely overwhelming. In fact, some really smart folks in recent years have set out to disprove it, only to end up joining the team. They became Christians as a result of their research.¹⁰

The resurrection is the final argument that Jesus is God, that He took care of our sin problem, our death problem, and made a way for us to forever be at peace with God. A whole lot of people at the time of Jesus said that they saw Him *alive* after His crucifixion. Many of them were so convinced they had seen Him that they shed their blood, refusing to renounce their claim. Why would so many of them willingly die if it weren't true?

He appeared to Cephas, and then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of them are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles. (1 Corinthians 15:5-7)

⁹ See the writings of early non-Christian historians Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.3.3, and Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44.

¹⁰ People like Nabeel Qureshi, *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016); Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); and Josh MacDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ International, 1972).

The word *gospel* literally means “good news,” and what better news is there than this? *It’s over! Finished! Jesus paid the penalty for all of our sins, and we can all be forgiven.* God confirmed it by raising Jesus from the dead.

He has given proof of this to everyone by raising Him from the dead. (Acts 17:31)

But there is still one more *massive* detail we need to cover. It’s that whole *Lord* issue we began the chapter with. This may be the key point more people are missing than any other.

6. JESUS IS LORD!

If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord ... you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)

Now we arrive at the point that so many in our time are fuzzy on, one more absolutely necessary aspect of a true salvation experience—you need to confess with your mouth, *Jesus is Lord*, and you need to understand what this means. In simple terms, it means that you step off the throne of your heart and give your Creator back His rightful place. Anyone who desires to truly be saved/born again/regenerated must understand this—part of the whole deal is giving themselves fully, unreservedly to the One who gave Himself fully and unreservedly for them.

Just so that no one misses the point, let me put it this way: If you rightly *confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord (Romans 10:9)*, there is now a word you will happily apply to yourself. The word is “slave,” in the Greek *doulos*. Check it out in the Bible. This is how the biblical authors often signed their letters—*Paul, a slave ...*, *James, a slave ...*,

Peter, a slave. If you never had any intention of obeying Him, of being His *doulos*, then He is not your Lord.

Why do you call me “Lord, Lord,” but don’t do what I ask? (Luke 6:46)

Our Creator didn’t become a man, sweat drops of blood, suffer rejection and persecution, get flogged to bloody ribbons, carry the cruel cross up Skull Hill, and then drink the cup of God’s wrath just so we could have a “get out of hell free” card. He saved us so that we would stop living like destructive, selfish little terrorists, scratching and clawing our way through life. He died for us in order to break sin’s rule and reign over us. He set us free so that we could serve Him in holiness and love. Don’t just *call* him *Lord*, *surrender* to Him as Lord.

In our crazy human minds, we think that we will be giving up something precious if we become Jesus’s slave. We are afraid of losing our freedom, but the fact is that we will never know what freedom is until we abandon ourselves fully to the rule and reign of Jesus Christ. *You will know the truth and the truth will make you free (John 8:32)*. Without question, God is an infinitely better Lord over me than I could ever be over myself. We will never find out who we really are or what life is all about until we let the Author of life take His rightful place on the throne of our heart. If you are willing to do this one final thing—*Confess Jesus as Lord*—you are in.

MAKING SURE YOU REALLY “GOT IT”

If you follow the New Testament prescription for salvation, you will experience a literal miracle—something supernatural takes place inside of you. Believe that Jesus is

God with skin on, who took your sins upon Himself then died in your place, who rose from the dead and is now Lord—*your* Lord—and you will be born again. Sometimes when people are born again, they are unaware that a miracle has just occurred inside them, but something amazing has happened, nonetheless. One of the most mind-bending aspects of this miracle is that the third member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, actually moves in and takes up permanent residence inside of you.

Don't you 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, glorify God with your bodies. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

He saved us ... by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, Whom He richly poured out upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior. (Titus 3:5-6)

New Christians can be completely unaware of this holy invasion—the Holy Spirit's presence inside of them—but there will be definite evidence that will prove He is there and prove that they are saved. There will be a new hunger for the things of God, a new ability to understand spiritual truth, and a new power to live out the Christian life. This evidence is proof positive that a person has truly been saved. (Turn to Appendix 1 in the back for an eight-point diagnostic test taken straight from the book of *1 John*.)

MOVING ON FROM HERE

This chapter was interested in just one thing—making sure that you, reader, are really born again. Jesus said, *Unless a man is born again, he will not see the kingdom of heaven*

(*John 3:3*). The remaining pages are full of incredible truths about the blessings and benefits available to God's true, born-again children—things like peace of mind, victory over sin, prayer that works, supernatural power for service, etc. But if you want in on the action, you have to make sure you are really in. You can call it a lot of different things (saved, regenerated, sanctified, justified, etc.), but what we are talking about is simply this—being made right with God. The sad fact is that many so-called “Christians” today are not experiencing much action in their spiritual life because they never really read the contract, so to speak. For anyone who does it right—accepts Jesus Christ as Savior and submits to Him as Lord—buckle up! You just hit the ignition switch.

2

KEY TWO: MIGHTY IN THE SCRIPTURES

*Can God use me if I don't know
the Bible that well?*

Ninety-nine Christians in every hundred are merely playing at Bible study, and therefore ninety-nine Christians in every hundred are mere weaklings when they might be giants, both in their Christian life and in their service. —R.A. Torrey (1856-1928)¹

Now a Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, an eloquent man, came to Ephesus; and he was mighty in the Scriptures. (Acts 18:24)

THE “HAVES” AND THE “HAVE-NOTS”

Having disciplined people for over 30 years, I have found that in God's kingdom, there is one thing that separates the “haves” from the “have-nots,” the mighty from the weak. Those Christians who never seem to get off the ground spiritually, and those who take off quickly only to plummet

¹ R.A. Torrey, *Why God Used D.L. Moody* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1923), 19-20.

back to earth, typically have this in common—they never take time to really get to know the Bible. They may listen to Christian music, read the latest Christian books, go to conferences, attend church, listen to podcasts, have moving spiritual experiences, even have a seminary degree ... but they just don't know THE BOOK. On the other hand, those Christians who take off like rockets and blaze through life like fiery comets share this trait—after becoming Christians, they spend countless hours in the Bible, marinating their minds in it, memorizing it, and meditating on it ... like my good friend Brandon.²

BRANDON'S METAMORPHOSIS

One of these days some simple soul will pick up the Book of God, read it, and believe it. Then the rest of us will be embarrassed. —Leonard Ravenhill (1907-1994)³

The wickedness in Brandon's family tree went as far back as he knew. Crime and immorality were the norm. His great-grandmother was a prostitute who used to "turn tricks" while her kids waited in the car. His grandmother was a stripper who married over a half dozen men. When Brandon was 18, some middle-aged guy claiming to be his dad showed up, but Brandon couldn't be sure. The mystery man was gone as quickly as he appeared.

² Since this book was first published, Brandon became a founding member and deacon of The Refuge Fellowship Church. He married Sophia (see her amazing story in Chapter 6), and they recently celebrated the birth of their first son. Brandon is now a successful business owner and employs many of the young men in our discipleship program. (See his testimony at <https://youtu.be/LYEf7l6-5M>.)

³ Leonard Ravenhill, *Why Revival Tarries* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1959), 61.

It probably won't surprise anyone to learn that Brandon spent his teenage years bouncing around the foster care system, moving from town to town, going from one school to another. It also won't surprise anyone to learn that he had a habit of getting into trouble with the law. I met him right around the time he was kicked out of our local high school; he got bored one night and decided to break in and vandalize it. The administration told him he would never be welcome back at that school again—ever! So you may wonder how it happened that Brandon not only received his diploma from that school but of all the students in his graduating class, he was chosen to give the baccalaureate address.

The only way to describe what happened to him is the word *metamorphosis*. His change was so radical that a school employee walked up to him one day and just broke down in tears. *What happened to you?* she asked. Brandon was always more than happy to tell anyone who wanted to know. *I gave my life to Jesus*, he would say. But you need to know that this was not all he did. He also took the next logical step, which separates him from thousands of other young people who have tried the whole “Jesus thing” and failed. Brandon made a deep commitment to know and obey the Word of God.

I had the privilege of discipling Brandon in those early years, with a front row seat to the jaw-dropping renovation of his broken life. Back in those days, there were many mornings I would pop out of bed at 4 a.m. and race over to the church. I knew Brandon would already be there, praying and studying God's Word. He was allowing God to ransack and renovate his fallen mind. He was in the habit of committing whole books of the Bible to memory—first James, then Galatians, then Romans. I honestly believe that

he had more Scripture memorized after just one year than most pastors do in a lifetime.

What's the takeaway here? Being saved, or born again, can happen as quick as lightning, but real-life change happens through that long, hard process called renewing the mind—a.k.a. discipleship. *Don't be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind (Romans 12:2)*. The fact is that even after our souls are saved, our minds are still a mess. Why? Because we don't get a brain transplant at salvation. If we really want to change, we have to know that BOOK. Without this, we may be saved, but (ironic as this sounds) still crazy. This applies to people from wild, sinful backgrounds like Brandon, but it also applies to people from nice religious backgrounds. (Jesus made it very clear that the “nice” folks are often the toughest nuts for God to crack.)

The great news is that everyone who is truly saved receives the Holy Spirit, so they now have the ability to understand the truths of the Bible—they have a new internal Teacher, Guide, and Interpreter (*1 Corinthians 2:16*). What they need to do next is adopt a new way of seeing the world. The Bible calls this *the mind of Christ*. But this new understanding is not automatic. The hard truth is that we need to relearn pretty much *everything*. Like Brandon, we absolutely must put in the time and effort. If we don't, we will remain spiritual babies, missing out on the riches of our inheritance in Christ, tragically ineffective in ministry.

WE ARE INSANE

Ever since the Garden of Eden, when we unplugged from God's light and life, humans have had a skewed vision of the universe. Sure, our minds can (more or less) grasp some of

the obvious, objective facts of the universe: $2 + 2 = 4$, water is made of hydrogen and oxygen, and dogs are way cooler than cats. But when it comes to discerning the bigger questions of life—priorities, meaning, value, morals, religion—our thinking is a hash, a twisted mess of truth and lies, sense and nonsense.

Their understanding is darkened, and they are separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. (Eph. 4:18)

Getting saved does not automatically fix our twisted thinking. We are still basically nuts—saved, but nuts. This means that a young Christian will often be just as wrong in their opinions as a lost person. Did you get that? *We can be saved yet have opinions that are actually opposed to the ways of God.* Getting saved initiates the process of transformation. Now we must renew our minds.

Every new Christian should have the following as their top priority. They should be on a single-minded quest to escape their sick, twisted, pre-Christian way of thinking and learn to see the world from God's perspective. How? By studying, memorizing, and meditating on God's Word—the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments. This is essential for anyone who hopes to find real freedom and fruitfulness.

If you remain in my words, then you are really my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. (John 8:31-32)

All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in right living; so that the godly person may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

The Bible says that we are saved so that we can become *disciples*, and the very word *disciple* (Gk. *mathētēs*) literally means *learner*. Jesus's program has always been about educating us, freeing us from the spell that sin and Satan had over our minds—getting us out of the spiritual nuthouse. On the day we get saved, we are admitted to school—God's school. He now needs to reteach us almost everything.

Someone might ask, *Is it really all that bad? Are our minds really that twisted?* The fact is that God's way of seeing things would never even cross the radar screen of our minds if God didn't help us. Listen to what He says about the matter in the book of Isaiah:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways, says the LORD. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (55:8-9)

Thankfully, God has taken the initiative to bridge that massive gap between His mind and ours. The same chapter in Isaiah tells us that He bridges this gap by sending His Word to us:

For just as the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth and making it bear and sprout, and providing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so is My word which goes forth from My mouth. (55:10-11)

The new heavenly perspective we so desperately need does not come through mystical intuition, and it doesn't come through some instantaneous zap when someone lays hands on and prays over us. We lay hold of this new perspective, literally the mind of Christ, as the Holy Spirit teaches us via the Word of God, the Bible. Don't be

deceived. Born-again Christians can be just as broken, crazy, emotionally unstable, bound up, and miserable as any lost person out there. Check out *1 Corinthians* sometime—those were some crazy Christians. They were saved, but crazy ... just like all of us before we renew our minds.

Yes, the Bible says that every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places is ours in Christ Jesus (*Ephesians 1:3*). Yes, God desires that we all experience deep intimacy with Him and have victory over sin and Satan. Yes, God wants us all to walk in peace, power, joy, and wisdom. But all these things don't happen instantaneously on the day we get saved. All these blessings only become ours as we prayerfully, humbly search God's Word every day and let it reform the deep structures of our minds.

Reading Christian books and listening to Christian podcasts simply will not get the job of transformation done. Having a spine-tingling spiritual experience won't fix us either. Even earning a seminary degree, and then going into full-time ministry, will not substitute for knowing God's Word deeply. As wonderful as all these things may be, they can only serve as supplements. We become strong and mature only when the Word of God gets into us and changes us.

*Like newborn babies, long for pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow in respect to your salvation.
(1 Peter 2:2)*

There are no shortcuts, and there are no cheats. The Christian who naïvely (or stubbornly) refuses to embrace God's process of renewing their mind will live out their days on earth like some billionaire child of a king who sleeps on the street and eats out of trash cans. This is precisely why so

many Christians feel like Christianity just doesn't work—they wanted a magic zap, not the arduous process of renewing their mind. At salvation, God gives us His Holy Spirit so we can understand His Word, and then He leads us into the written text so we can lay hold of the riches of our inheritance. This is the only way our lives will change—as we allow the Spirit to lead us in God's truth.

Things which no eye has seen and no ear has heard and which have never even entered into the heart of man, all the things that God has prepared for those who love Him. But to us He has revealed them through His Spirit. (1 Corinthians 2:9)

SO GROW UP!

As a result, we should no longer be children, tossed around by waves and carried all over by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by shrewdness in devious scheming; but lovingly speaking truth, we should grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head—Christ. (Ephesians 4:14-15)

According to the Bible, a Christian who has not done their time in the Word is *de facto* a spiritual “baby.” Spiritual babies are often full of naïve self-confidence, but they are of little use to God's kingdom and cause. They can't do much. They may have burning hearts to save the world, but the problem is they are still largely *un-Christian* in their thought processes.

Paul pulls no punches when rebuking such stunted Christians. They are pretty easy to spot—they believe themselves to be capable and wise but often don't play well with others (they are often ministry critics and ministry splitters).

I gave you milk and not solid food, for you were not yet able to receive it. The fact is that even now, you are still not able. For you are still living by the flesh. Since there is jealousy and fighting among you, are you not still fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men? (1 Corinthians 3:1-3)

The author of Hebrews rebukes his readers for having the same problem. He could tell they were spiritual babies because he needed to keep reviewing the basics of the faith with them. They had more than enough time to mature in the Word, but they were still in spiritual diapers. Very specifically, they are rebuked because they are unclear about an Old Testament figure by the name of Melchizedek. (*How many Christians today know anything about Melchizedek?*)

By this time, you should be teachers, but you still need someone to teach you the most basic principles of the words of God. (Hebrews 5:12)

Now there is nothing wrong with starting out as a baby—we all do—but we must grow up, and the only way to do this is to deeply know the Word of God.

Here is the cold, hard truth—if anyone thinks they are ready for ministry (to disciple someone, be a ministry leader, a teacher, or a missionary) before they can quote hundreds and hundreds of Scriptures by heart, they are deceived. The reality is that they are still just a baby, a deceived baby.

If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. (Galatians 6:3)

Let's get practical here. A reasonable starting point for any serious new believer would be at least an hour a day in the Bible. Considering our extreme condition—insanity—

this is really a pretty minimal commitment, but it will get you started. I always recommend to new disciples that much of this daily hour be spent memorizing. (*One of the first things I encourage a new believer to do is memorize the entire book of James, all five chapters.*)

Is what I am suggesting here some radical new approach to Christianity? No, it is the clear message and method taught by both Scripture and history. It is really the only way that works and the only way that God honors. As we will see below, the first disciples were absolutely filled with Scripture ... even before Jesus called them. We will also see that the most powerful, effective servants of God in church history—the George Müllers, D.L. Moodys, John Wesleys, etc. — knew the Bible like they knew their own names. It's the old school way and one of the primary reasons that the old schoolers were so much more effective than we are today.

If God is to come in power again to transform the barren wastelands of our earth into a beautiful, lush garden, it will only happen as someone (anyone) makes a renewed commitment to really know and follow His Word. *Someone like you.*

THE BIBLICAL MODEL

A dangerous teaching is being passed around the church these days, misleading scores of zealous young believers. The main point of this misguided Bible study goes something like this—*You may be a young Christian, but God can use you RIGHT NOW to do amazing things. So get out there and lead a Bible study, become a small group leader, disciple someone, or get out on the mission field. NOW!* The Scripture below is often (mis)used as a springboard:

Let no one look down on the fact that you are young, but in speech, behavior, love, faith, and purity, prove yourself to be an example to those who believe. (1 Timothy 4:12)

This verse, taken from Paul's first letter to his young protégé Timothy, is wrongly interpreted to insist that even a very new Christian can immediately jump right in and effectively minister almost anywhere. But the truth proven by Scripture, history, and experience is that apart from hours and hours (days, weeks, and years) of submitting to the process of developing *the mind of Christ*, we won't be able to do much for God.

The first thing new believers need to do is take adequate time to prepare themselves and get their own heads on straight. They need to get to know the Bible deeply—memorize a few small epistles for starters, learn about all the important figures and events, and then spend time figuring out how the spiritual principles laid out in the Bible actually work. This is stage one for everyone who wants to have a lifetime of useful service for God. There is no other way. Again, there are no cheat codes, no shortcuts.

Let's put on our thinking caps, and briefly look at *1 Timothy 4:12*—*let no one look down on the fact that you are young*. What is this verse really saying? What do we know about young Timothy? In the first place, we know that he was not an inexperienced new believer. He was probably pushing 40 years old at this point. It's also helpful to know that prior to receiving this letter, Timothy had traveled with the apostle Paul for almost a decade and a half; that's enough time to earn a BA, an MA, and a PhD ... under the personal tutelage of one of the greatest Christians who ever lived.

But Timothy's season of being mentored by Paul is really only half of his impressive résumé. He had a profound

knowledge of Scripture before Paul ever met him. How do we know this? The Bible tells us that he was raised by a pious first-century Jewish mother. We will talk a little more about what such an upbringing looked like in a moment. Suffice it to say, on the day Paul chose him (see *Acts 16*), he knew the Scriptures better than you or I ever will. He probably had most of the Old Testament memorized. Paul himself says to Timothy, *From infancy, you have known the sacred scriptures (2 Timothy 3:15).*

All the evidence says that: 1. Timothy knew the Old Testament Scriptures like the back of his hand on the day Paul recruited him, and 2. He then spent around 15 years learning from the man who wrote 13 of our 27 New Testament books. Any Bible study honoring what *1 Timothy 4:12* is really saying would conclude something like this: *A person who knows the Scriptures deeply and then goes through years of adequate preparation, discipleship, and mentoring is ready for ministry ... even if they are still relatively young.* To apply this verse to a new believer who has almost no biblical knowledge and no ministry experience is not only misleading, it is dangerous. (*I can tell you horror stories, seriously.*)

But we humans are stubborn in our errors, and we are particularly devoted to the romantic notion that any Christian with a burning heart can do virtually anything. We even have little jingles, like advertisements, to promote it—*God doesn't need your ability; He needs your availability.* We rip all sorts of Scriptures out of their literary context to support this misguided assertion. One favorite is *Philippians 4:13*—*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.* This is mistakenly used to insist that Jesus is the magic that will enable a person with no knowledge or experience to change

the world. (If you read *Philippians 4:13* in context, you will find that it actually has more to do with God sustaining a seasoned saint who is sitting on death row ... but I digress.)

Does this mean a person needs to lock themselves away in an ivory tower for 10 years before they can do any sort of ministry? Absolutely not. We should all be sharing our faith immediately, and with just a little learning, we can be effective at evangelism pretty quickly. We should also be trying out our wings in different ministries to see what unique spiritual gifts we might have. But like the original disciples and Timothy, there needs to be a serious, prolonged time of learning and being trained. For Timothy, this was the years spent with Paul. This time of being mentored is something that is almost completely missing from the church today. Even more importantly, so is the strong foundation of biblical knowledge that all the earliest disciples possessed. Let's look at some more biblical evidence.

JESUS

Jesus is not only our Savior, He is also our paradigm, our model of what a life pleasing to God looks like. One thing is abundantly clear—He had a deep, deep knowledge of Scripture. He was so well schooled in the Scriptures that even as a child, He amazed the great religious leaders in Jerusalem (*Luke 2:47*). We see how powerfully He wields the Scripture in His debates with the religious opposition until they just give up (*Matthew 22:46*). How effortlessly He cuts the devil down with Scripture, saying, *It is written* (*Matthew 4:1-11*). How did He become so well versed in the biblical text? Hard work.

Many people are under the delusion that Jesus had some sort of “easy button” that He could push whenever things got

rough, that He could just fall back on His powers as infinite God to get Him through the tough times. On the contrary, all the biblical evidence indicates that Jesus had to grit it out just like we do. He set aside all His powers and prerogatives as God when He became the God-Man (*Philippians 2:6-7*). This means that Jesus had to put in countless hours of memorization and study just like all the rest of us. Even though this is true, it's easy for us to say, *No one can be just like Jesus, so I am off the hook*. Okay, then let's move on from Him and look at some mere mortals who were a lot more like us—His first disciples. How well did they know the Scriptures?

THE FIRST DISCIPLES

People who don't understand first-century Judaism might say, *Jesus's disciples were just good old blue-collar boys, so they probably didn't know Scripture that well*. How abysmally wrong that thought is. The fact is that on the very first day that Jesus called His disciples, they all probably knew the Scriptures better than any pastor you will ever meet (yes, I said *on the day Jesus called them*). The average pious first-century Jew in Israel ate, slept, and breathed Scripture from the day they were born. Their entire world was saturated, shaped, and instructed by it. The first-century historian Josephus (37-100 A.D.) tells us how well versed in it the average "Jew on the street" was in Jesus's day:

If anybody but asks any one of them about our laws (The Scripture), he will more readily tell them all than he will tell his own name, and this in consequence of our having learned them immediately as soon as ever we became

*sensible of anything, and of our having them as it were engraved on our souls.*⁴

The fact is that the first disciples—Peter, Andrew, James, John, etc.—took in the Old Testament writings with their mother’s milk. As good Jewish boys, their earliest education at home centered around the Scripture, and then at about six years of age, they were sent off to the local synagogue to begin formal instruction. Here they were grilled over the first five books of Scripture, called *The Torah* or *The Pentateuch*. It was not uncommon for young boys to memorize them in their entirety—that means *Genesis through Deuteronomy permanently tattooed on their little brains*. Most of them would also apprentice in a trade, like fishing or carpentry, but they did this in conjunction with years of diligent Scripture study.

In addition to their rigorous life of study, memorizing huge tracks of the Old Testament, we can’t overlook the fact that the disciples later went to “Jesus University.” They spent over three years full-time sitting at Jesus’s feet, learning and being coached by the Master Himself. If you do the math, this amounts to well over 10,000 hours of additional learning and field practice. Jesus would often challenge and critique them during this time to make sure they were getting things right.

(I like to ask young people who want to go into ministry, *Have you done your 10,000 hours yet?* But, the comparison really breaks down because the disciples’ 10,000 hours were done on top of their earlier training. Remember that on day one, they already knew the Old Testament better than you or I ever will.)

⁴ Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2, 19.

What about the latecomer, the apostle Paul, who wrote 13 of our New Testament books (*Romans* through *Philemon*)? What kind of preparation did he go through? Well, as a little boy he went to the synagogue school, and all evidence is that he was recognized as having unique intellectual abilities. He was put on the “gifted track.” The book of *Acts* tells us that he was sent to study under one of the greatest teachers of his day, a rabbi by the name of Gamaliel (*Acts* 22:3). To make a long story short, this means that when Jesus called him, Paul knew the Scriptures even better than Peter, Andrew, John, and the boys. He probably had the biblical text memorized in multiple languages, not to mention the fact that he would have been up on all the relevant theological, philosophical, and historical discussions of his day. (Oh yeah, we can’t forget that he still spent an additional 10 years or so preparing *after* Jesus called him—read *Galatians* 1). Conclusion: The first disciples *really* knew the Scriptures. Do we?

GO AND MAKE DUMBED-DOWN DISCIPLES ...

Here is a question that every serious Christian needs to chew on: Before Jesus went back to His Father, did He tell the disciples to perpetuate some dumbed-down version of Christianity? Did Jesus say, *Just have them memorize John 3:16 and encourage them to have a 10-minute quiet time every day?* What Jesus actually said was that He wanted them to reproduce themselves, to make followers who knew everything they knew. *Teach them to observe everything I commanded you (Matthew 28:20)*. Let’s state the obvious—this would mean a deep knowledge of the Scriptures as a foundation and then several years of instruction and guidance.

Paul gives the same sort of instructions to Timothy. *Reproduce what you are, Timothy, generation after generation after generation.*

The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. (2 Timothy 2:2)

The obvious conclusion? We have some catching up to do. We are called to be little copies of the original disciples. Again, they had vast portions of the Scriptures committed to memory on day one, and they spent over 10,000 hours sitting at Jesus's feet being coached in life and ministry. The stark reality is that the contemporary Christian church is lightyears from Jesus's original vision. Could this be why we have lost sight of so many of the things they knew and cannot do the things they did? The contrast between their notion of discipleship and the contemporary church seems (to borrow a biblical phrase) *as high as the heavens are above the earth*. But things have not always been this way in God's church. When God's people have recaptured His vision of discipleship and a passion for the Scriptures, God's power has been unleashed on earth.

FOLLOWING THE HISTORICAL MODEL

If you look to the lives of God's best and brightest down through the ages, they clearly have some things in common. One common denominator is that they had a jaw-dropping commitment to the Word of God. There are quite literally thousands of amazing men and women I could point to here. Below is a quick sampling from the lives of some of my favorite Christians of all time.

GEORGE MÜLLER (1805-1898)

Anyone who doubts that the God of Elijah is still alive and well needs to read Müller's biography.⁵ What was his secret? It is a well-known fact that this amazing man of faith read his Bible from beginning to end almost 200 times over the course of his life and had much of it committed to memory. The accounts of his life are almost too much to process. He led multitudes into the kingdom and is best known for raising thousands of orphans without ever asking for a dime. He simply prayed in faith and expected God to do miracles. Below is a life-altering discovery that Müller made as a young, immature Christian. We would be wise to pay attention to his words.

I fell into the snare, into which many young believers fall, the reading of religious books in preference to the Scriptures. ... I read tracts, missionary newsletters, sermons, and biographies of Christian people. ... Like many believers, I practically preferred, for the first four years of my divine life, to read the works of uninspired men rather than the oracles of the living God. The consequence was that I remained a babe, both in knowledge and grace.⁶

Once his eyes were opened, although he was a scholar with a working knowledge of 10 languages, until the day of

⁵ For an introduction to Müller's life, see A.T. Pierson, *George Müller of Bristol and his Witness to a Prayer-Hearing God* (New York: The Baker and Taylor Co., 1899). For a less comprehensive autobiography, see George Müller, *The Life of Trust: Being a Narrative of the Lord's Dealings with George Müller* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1861).

⁶ *Answers to Prayer from George Müller's Narratives*, compiled by A.E.C. Brooks (Chicago: Moody Press, 1895), 56.

his death Müller preferred to simply abide in the words of Scripture.

I saw that the most important thing I had to do was to give myself to the reading of the word of God and to meditation on it. ... What is the food of the inner man? Not prayer, but the word of God; and ... not the simple reading of the word of God, so that it only passes through our minds, just as water runs through a pipe, but considering what we read, pondering over it, and applying it to our hearts.⁷

D.L. MOODY (1837-1899)⁸

It is estimated that this one-man phenomenon led one million people to Christ over the course of his life. He never received a formal education in the great universities of America or Europe, but he had a deep knowledge of the Bible. In a sermon preached after his death, his dear friend R.A. Torrey revealed one of the secrets of his effectiveness:

(H)e was a student, a profound and practical student of the one Book that is more worth studying than all other books in the world put together; he was a student of the Bible. Every day of his life, I have reason for believing, he arose very early in the morning to study the Word of God, way down to the close of his life. Mr. Moody used to rise about four o'clock in the morning to study the Bible. He would say to me: "If I am going to get in any study, I have got to get up before the other folks get up," and he would

⁷ George Müller, *George Müller, The Life of Trust* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln), 209.

⁸ For an introduction to Moody's life, see William R. Moody, *The Life of D.L. Moody* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1900).

*shut himself up in a remote room in his house, alone with his God and his Bible.*⁹

Moody himself regularly made comments like the following:

*I never saw a fruit-bearing Christian who was not a student of the Bible. If a man neglects his Bible, he may pray and ask God to use him in His work; but God cannot make use of him, for there is not much for the Holy Ghost to work upon. We must have the Word itself, which is sharper than any two-edged sword.*¹⁰

R.A. TORREY (1856-1928)

Torrey was Moody's protégé and successor at the Moody Bible Institute, author of dozens of spiritual classics, and one of the most influential Christians of his day. Here is his opinion on the matter:

*The great reservoir of the power that belongs to God is His own Word—the Bible. If we wish to make it ours, we must go to that Book. Yet people abound in the church who are praying for power and neglecting the Bible. ... If we are to obtain fullness of power in life and service, we must feed upon the Word of God. ... If we will not take time to study the Bible, we cannot have power any more than we can have physical power if we will not take time to eat nutritious food.*¹¹

⁹ *Why God Used D.L. Moody*, 17.

¹⁰ D.L. Moody, *Pleasure and Profit in Bible Study* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1895), 8.

¹¹ R.A. Torrey, *How to Obtain Fullness of Power* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1897), 7.

The irrefutable fact is this—those whom God uses greatly have a deep and profound knowledge of the Bible. John Wesley (1703- 1791), God’s great firebrand in The First Great Awakening, said, *O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be “homo unius libri”* (a man of one book).¹² It was said of John Bunyan (1628-1688), the author of one of the most influential Christian books ever written (*Pilgrim’s Progress*¹³), that he was so filled with Scripture that if you pricked him with a pin, he would bleed lines from the Bible. Francis Asbury (1745-1816), arguably the most important figure in the Christianizing of post-Revolutionary War America, said this, *I find ... it of more consequence to a preacher to know his Bible than all the languages or books in the world.*¹⁴ Consider the Methodist Circuit Riders, responsible for Christianizing the wild American frontiers. They were expected to spend six hours a day in the study of the Bible and related books.

The testimony is the same when we jump across the oceans, cultures, and generations. John Sung (1901-1944),¹⁵ one of the most influential men in the history of the Chinese church, called “John the Baptist of China,” read through the Bible 40 times in only seven months before he exploded onto

¹² This quote is found in the preface of Wesley’s collected sermons. See, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 5.

¹³ One of the bestselling Christian books of all time, this classic was written in 1678, and originally titled, *The Pilgrim’s Progress from This World, to That Which Is to Come*.

¹⁴ *The Journal of Francis Asbury*, July 23, 1779.

¹⁵ See, *The Diary of John Sung: Extracts from His Journal and Notes* (Singapore: Armour Publishing, 2011).

the scene. A more recent example of a mighty man of God in China is Brother Yun (b. 1958).¹⁶ After his conversion, Yun was in the habit of committing whole books of the Bible to memory. His very first sermon was reciting the entire *Gospel of Matthew* verse by verse. If I brought out all the historical data here, this chapter could go on for hundreds of pages. The bottom line is this—to be mature in Christ and mighty in ministry, you must know the Bible deeply. The Bible teaches this. History teaches this. There is simply no other way.

*Oh, you may talk about power; but, if you neglect the one Book that God has given you as the one instrument through which He imparts and exercises His power, you will not have it. You may read many books and go to many conventions, and you may have your all-night prayer meetings to pray for the power of the Holy Ghost; but unless you keep in constant and close association with the one Book, the Bible, you will not have power. And if you ever had power, you will not maintain it except by the daily, earnest, intense study of that Book.*¹⁷

THE HARD TRUTH

According to the Bible, we all begin our Christian lives as fools. Our first objective as Christians should be to take adequate time to get our personal/spiritual/psychological house in order. Only then will we be able to help others. Think about it. Prior to meeting Jesus, you and I spent years and years programming our minds for sin and death with pop

¹⁶ Paul Hattaway and Brother Yun, *The Heavenly Man: The Remarkable True Story of Chinese Christian Brother Yun* (Grand Rapids: Monarch Books, 2002).

¹⁷ *Why God Used D.L. Moody*, 19.

culture, movies, gossip, talk shows, crazy professors, and bad religion. This rotten thinking has to be cleaned out and replaced with the mind of Christ. *Erase and Replace!*

Don't let anyone deceive himself; if anyone of you thinks he is wise in this age, he must become foolish so that he can become wise. For this world's wisdom is foolishness to God. (1 Corinthians 3:18-19)

Like Brandon, we need to allow God to demolish what we think and rebuild our minds. If Christians won't allow God to do this, they will remain blind fools ... ironically, saved blind fools (and their lives of frustration will bear this out).

In biblical times, they used to lay hands on people when they were sending them into ministry. Paul warned, *Don't lay hands on anyone too quickly (1 Timothy 5:22)*. Why? Because they don't really have any idea what they are doing and they will inevitably get themselves and others into trouble. A young believer isn't even close to being ready to fulfill Christ's mandate—*Go into all the world and make disciples*. To do that, a person needs to be familiar with all the subjects in this book—they need to know how to walk in victory over sin, how to move God's hand with their prayers, they need to understand spiritual warfare, how to cooperate with the Holy Spirit, etc. Please hear me, next generation—a young believer who does not know the Bible can't do any of this yet.

We should all be telling people about Jesus the very day we get saved, but New Testament ministry is not just about sharing the gospel. Jesus's Great Commission was not just, *Get people saved*—it was, *Make disciples*. This is a task that takes some real expertise. Making disciples means that in

addition to *getting them saved*, we need to teach them absolutely everything that Jesus and the apostles said about everything—money, marriage, sex, prayer, psychological disorders, suffering, bitterness, spiritual power, Satan, etc.

*Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations ...
teaching them to observe everything I commanded you.
(Matthew 28:19-20)*

The core problem with so much Christian ministry these days is this: The people who are trying to do ministry never went through the New Testament process of becoming disciples themselves. The sad fact is that their attempts to help others are, for the most part, *all zeal, no knowledge*; they don't have biblical wisdom to give away. But seriously, isn't this all just common sense? If I haven't learned (from the Bible) how to unravel the knots in my own head, I can't help anyone else unravel theirs. If I don't know how to overcome sin, I can't help you overcome sin. If I don't know how to pray effectively, or anything about the Holy Spirit, how can I help you?

What so many of us in the church really need to do is to back way, way up. We need to stop telling new believers to charge out and “save the world” and first teach them how to do it. Ministry is a skill set, and very few people are experiencing success because they haven't taken the time to learn. So let's pull back and refocus on Jesus's original mission for His followers—*learn everything He had to say about everything*, or as the apostle put it, *Be transformed through the renewing of the mind (Romans 12:2)*. The fact is that all of us come into God's kingdom insane, and it takes serious time to straighten out our own minds.

MY PLEA

I am appealing to the generation behind mine—PLEASE BECOME MIGHTY IN THE WORD. I hate to say this, but my generation has largely blown it. This fact has been proven by scientific research—American Christians remain “fond of” the Bible, but they don’t actually read it.¹⁸ The average pew warmer of my generation can quote their favorite movies, sing you whole albums of secular music, and give you their favorite sitcom episodes line-by-line. Still, very few can say (like Jesus did), *It is written*. There are exceptions, of course, but for all our talk about being “Bible-based” and “Bible-believing,” I doubt one Christian in a hundred over 30 years of age can even tell you the books of the Bible in order.

Please, next generation, don’t follow our lead. For the last 100 years, much of the evangelical church was like a big spiritual nursery school just waiting for the next Pied Piper, the next quick fix, the next shortcut. Please do what the powerhouses in Scripture and history did. Memorize that book, meditate on it, and marinate your brains in it until you have the mind of Christ. Develop the ability to discern for yourself. Don’t trust anyone until they pass the Berean test—*they searched the Scriptures daily to see if these things were true (Acts 17:11)*. Don’t be afraid to scrutinize your own church, your pastor, and all the authors, experts, and media personalities out there who claim to represent God.

You have a huge job in front of you—reprogramming your entire operating system, dismantling and reassembling your worldview—and that takes blood, sweat, and tears

¹⁸ See Bob Smietana, “LifeWay Research: Americans Are Fond of the Bible, Don’t Actually Read It” (LifeWay Research, April 25, 2017).

(hours, days, weeks, years). This is the only way to spiritual maturity and the only way our world will ever be transformed. Become mighty in the Word. Then *you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (John 8:32).*

Postscript: The Great Twentieth-Century Spiritual Cheat

Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize ... taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God. (Colossians 2:18-19)

Before moving on, there is one more issue I need to address very quickly. In the twentieth century, a massive lie was propagated in certain sectors of God's church (and it now continues into the twenty-first century). This lie is that the real, biblically recommended process of Christian maturity can be avoided. *We don't need to have a profound knowledge of the Bible, we are told. We don't have to spend 10,000 hours at the feet of the Master like the first disciples did, many say. God has provided His children with a shortcut, a cheat—a fast track to maturity and usefulness.*

What is this supposed "cheat" that can save us from years of hard study and discipline, prayer, and practice? *Having a direct line to Jesus without ever really knowing the Bible.* The argument typically goes something like this: *Studying the Bible is for unspiritual, dry, bookish types, but for the truly spiritual, God will talk directly to you, and you don't really need the Bible.* I recall hearing of one misguided youth

leader under this delusion tearing pages out of his Bible, saying, *We don't need the Bible if we have Jesus*. Recently, another teacher was defending her very strange views by claiming she had a “revelatory gift.” She said she was not “bound” to the biblical text because she had a “special” relationship with Jesus—He directly revealed secrets to her.

Sadly, this delusion seems pandemic right now. Spiritual babies by the thousands flock to churches, conferences, and so-called revivals because they want to go deep with God, but they don't want to put in the long hours necessary. They rely on mystical intuitions, dreams, visions, prophetic words, and spiritual experiences. The harm this hyper-spiritual delusion has brought to young Christians is impossible to calculate, but I pray to God the massive trend does not lay hold of the next generation the way it laid hold of many people in mine. Once again, there is no shortcut to the Promised Land; there are no cheat codes. Follow the lie, and the one who gets cheated will be you.

As an aside, am I against God speaking directly to us via dreams, visions, prophetic words, etc.? Absolutely not! My view is that if it is in the Bible, it's fair game for us today. *Your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams (Acts 2:17)*. Most of the great moves of God and the great saints down through the ages experienced some pretty wild and amazing stuff. But the big difference between the old schoolers and today's spiritual cheaters is that the old schoolers knew the Word deeply. Today's spiritual cheaters, as a rule, do not.

Those who open themselves up to things like mystical impressions, dreams, visions, and prophecies before they have a deep rooting and grounding in the Word of God are headed for trouble. They simply don't have the tools

necessary to determine the source of their dreams, visions, impressions, etc.—are they from heaven or hell?

At the very beginning of His ministry, Jesus showed us how to do it—check all spiritual promptings with the Word of God (*Matthew 4:1-11*). Anyone who doesn't know the Bible deeply simply cannot do this. Satan and his hordes are just licking their chops, waiting for the next hyper-spiritual baby Christian who believes they can attain maturity apart from a deep knowledge of the Bible. But the hosts of hell tremble at the thought of those who, like Jesus, can cut them down with, "*It is written ...*"

3

KEY THREE: HOLINESS

How do I stop sinning (and why should I)?

In Jesus Christ a new nature was prepared for the believer ... the needed endowments for living holily, the heart's inclination, and the sufficient strength to serve God acceptably are provided for us in that new nature, and ... this is communicated to us through our living union with Christ.—Andrew Murray (1828-1917)¹

Without holiness, no one will see the Lord. (Heb. 12:14)

JAY'S BATTLE WITH SIN

Living a life that is pleasing to God (*holiness*) is absolutely essential if we want to experience all the benefits and blessings of being a Christian. When my friend Jay first started following Jesus, it seemed like holiness was impossible. He came out of a crazy, destructive lifestyle. He had been sexually abused as a child, and the trauma led him into years of sexual sin and drug use. Needless to say, he still

¹ One of the most important works written on holiness (outside the Bible) is Walter Marshall's *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification* (1692). However, this work is massive and very difficult to follow. Andrew Murray made this classic more accessible in the following book: Walter Marshall, *Sanctification, The Highway to Holiness* (London: Nisbet & Co. Limited, 1884). The above quote comes from Murray's introduction to this work (pp. vi-vii).

had some big issues to hammer out. We got together once a week at his place for intense spiritual conversation (and his awesome homemade breakfast pizza). One of these mornings stands out in my mind more than all the others—the day Jay desperately asked, *How do I keep from falling into my old sin habits?*

I began the discussion with a question. I asked him what biblical strategies he was using to combat sin. He looked at me blankly, like he had no idea there were such strategies. I told him that our battle against sin is sort of like a wrestling match. *If you don't have any moves, you get thrashed.* I told him that the Bible gives us a plethora of moves to use. I came up with ten of them right off the top of my head. We spent the next hour or so talking over these strategies, and when we were done, Jay said, *You really need to make this into a Bible study.* That conversation happened over ten years ago, and I have taught “Ten Strategies for Overcoming Sin” frequently since then.

If we are going to be technical about it, we should actually call the study “One Major Spiritual Principle ... and Nine Strategies for Overcoming Sin.” The fact is that you really need to wrap your mind around the first truth if you ever hope to have ongoing victory over sin. Therefore, we will be devoting several pages to the first principle and just a few paragraphs to each of the remaining nine strategies.

So, what is number one, the all-important principle so vital for living out the Christian life? You must, by faith, embrace the fact that now you are really, actually a saint, literally a *holy one* (Gk. *hagios*). You may not feel like a saint, but the fact is that if you are truly born again, you *are* a saint—end of discussion. According to the New Testament, when we are born again God not only forgives

us, He changes us at the very deepest level of our being. He gives us a new nature—He makes us holy!

If you think of yourself as a twisted, wicked person (who just happens to be going to heaven), you will never be free. You must embrace your new identity, your new nature. A saint doesn't obey God because they have to, they obey because that's who they *are* now. Embracing this truth is absolutely foundational for living a holy, victorious Christian life. Only then can we talk about the remaining strategies. They are vital but must work in conjunction with this foundational reality—you *are* a saint.

STRATEGY 1: BELIEVE YOU ARE A SAINT

Are you ignorant ... ? (Romans 6:3)

It seems that just about every week, either my wife or I get a call from a young person asking if we would consider discipling them. We always say *sure* and then go to our favorite coffee shop for an interview of sorts. We are interviewing them, but they are also interviewing us. Most of these talks go pretty well (like Jason in Chapter 1), but occasionally we won't hear from the student again.

On those rare occasions when a young person says, *Thanks, but no thanks*, the reason is often the same. They don't want to give up partying, or they are in an ungodly dating relationship that they refuse to let go of. In short, they want to keep a little "sin action" going on the side. They want a version of Christianity that says, *Don't worry about it, nobody's perfect. It's all covered by the blood of Jesus*. In the course of our interview, they realize we won't simply wink at a little "sin on the side," and so they decide to pass on the whole discipleship thing.

The apostles dealt with this same issue in the first century. In Romans 6, the apostle Paul (playing devil's advocate) asks, *Should we keep on sinning so that God's grace might abound?* Paul's answer is like a slap in the face. He first gives his most emphatic Greek, *NO WAY* (Gk. *mè génoito*), then asks these deluded Christians the rhetorical question, *Are you ignorant?* Paul then proceeds to correct their misguided thinking. He explains in meticulous detail the spiritual realities that take place inside a person who is really born again. His main point is that the very idea of a real Christian willfully continuing in sin doesn't even make sense.

Why do birds fly? Why do fish swim? Because it's their nature. A similar answer could be given to the question, *Why don't Christians sin?* Or the flipside, *Why do Christians live right?* Because it's their nature. The New Testament makes it clear over and over that when a person is born again, they are transformed in the deepest part—the very core—of their being (what the Bible calls *the spirit, the inner man*). Their very nature is changed. Because of this, nothing is more natural and comfortable for them than living a life pleasing to God. As John says, *His commandments are not burdensome* (1 John 5:3). Paul says, *I joyfully agree with the law of God in the inner man* (Romans 7:22). This inner change is a secret to victory that the greatest Christians down through the ages have understood.

In 1677 a letter from a young man by the name of Henry Scougal was made into a little book titled, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*. In it, Scougal explains to a friend what real Christianity is. It's not an effort to conform to external rules—do's and don'ts. It's not primarily an effort to avoid punishment or obtain spiritual blessings (even heaven).

According to Scougal (and the Bible), real Christianity is all about God's very life infused into the human soul. This changes everything ... from the inside out.

Scougal died very soon after this letter was written, but God has used this little book to bless thousands. (It is actually what saved one of the greatest preachers of all time, George Whitefield [1714-1770]). Scougal says,

True religion is a union of the soul with God, a real participation of the divine nature, the very image of God drawn upon the soul, or, in the apostle's phrase, "It is Christ formed within us." Briefly, I know not how the nature of religion can be more fully expressed than by calling it a Divine Life.²

Are you aware of the fact that when you were born again, an inner transformation occurred in the deepest part of you? You received an infusion of the life of God into your soul. To be even more specific, you entered into a mysterious union with the Holy Spirit, and the deepest part of you was actually made one with Him. *He who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him (1 Corinthians 6:17)*. As a result, your very deepest desires have been changed—you now yearn to do God's will, and you have also been given all the power you need to live out these new desires. The apostle Peter puts it this way, *You have become partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4)*.

Don't make the tragic mistake of believing that you are still the same old sinful, selfish wretch that just happens to be going to heaven now. To put it bluntly, that is an unbiblical, ignorant view of salvation. When we were born

² Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (Boston: Nichols and Noyes, 1868), 6-7.

again, it's like we were given a holy heart transplant. God's Holy Spirit and our spirit are joined together as one.

One of the most frequent ways the Bible refers to this holy transformation is by calling God's people *saints* or *holy ones*. I know the idea that we are saints is a stretch for those who grew up in certain religious traditions, where only superhero Christians are called saints. But the New Testament makes it perfectly clear that we are *all* saints the very moment we are born again. Some Christians think they are being humble by refusing to call themselves saints, but the fact is that they are just disagreeing with God.

Because of what Jesus has done, even the weakest Christian is a saint—forgiven and clean and bent toward God and His ways. This reality is affirmed in the New Testament epistles every time the apostles write, *To the saints (holy ones) in Rome*, or *the saints (holy ones) in Philippi*, or *the saints (holy ones) in Colossae*, etc. They used to be identified as “sinners,” but now they are holy.

NEW POWER

Another thing every born-again person needs to be clear on is this—in addition to having your identity changed, you also need to embrace the fact that God has infused power into you. He knew we couldn't pull off this “holy living” thing in our own strength. When He gives us His Holy Spirit, He also gives us the supernatural power to do His will. So if you are truly born again, you actually have way more power inside of you than you will ever need. Understanding this is a game-changer.

One prayer found in the New Testament puts a profound twist on this idea. Paul prays that Christians understand that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is now

available to them. Most new believers are totally unaware of this.

I pray that the eyes of your heart would be enlightened so that you would know ... the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He demonstrated in Christ when He raised Him up from the dead. (Eph. 1:18-20)

We are not supposed to see ourselves, first and foremost, as weak, wicked sinners who are straining (against our deepest desires) to be good. No, we have been invaded and transformed by the Holy Spirit. We are now saints learning how to cooperate with our new identity and tap into this new power source.

Of course, we need to stay balanced here. This doesn't at all mean we are now perfect and will never stumble. The book of James summarizes it best when it says, *We all stumble in many ways (James 3:2)*. The fact is that when we are saved, we are saints, but we are stumbling, bumbling, little baby saints. We still have a lot to learn, but nothing we do or don't do will change the fact that we are saints—changed at the very core of our being, made one with God, and filled with new desire and power. We may stumble, but *sinner* is no longer our primary identity.

Don't be deceived, neither fornicators, nor idol-worshippers, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunks, nor troublemakers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were, but you were washed, you were made holy, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

It takes some practice and a lot of retraining of the brain to embrace this radical idea, but don't fight it. Holiness is natural for you now—you are a saint. This is why a Christian who wants to sin is utterly crazy, like a fish determined to get out of the water and flop around on the land.

We need to look further into this matter to really make sense of things. Every young Christian will inevitably find themselves asking, *If I am now a saint, why do I sometimes still feel a powerful pull towards sin?* One reason is that, although we have been changed at the very deepest level of our being (*the spirit, the inner man*), we still have the same brain we had before salvation (we covered a little of that in the previous chapter). We need to retrain our brains, which the Bible calls *renewing the mind* (*Romans 12:1-2*).

Another fact is this—until our life on earth is over, we all carry around inside ourselves a fallen, evil power. This is like a little monster, a sinful compulsion inside us that fights against our new nature. We must learn how to master this monster.

MASTERING THE MONSTER

Again, the Bible says that even after God changes our nature, there is still an evil force remaining in us. The New Testament calls this *the sinful nature* or *the flesh* (Gk. *sárx*). It can also be referred to as the *old man*.³ This power will eventually be removed (*Hallelujah!*), but unfortunately, it remains in us until the day we die. It is sort of like a

³ *Galatians 5:19-21* describes the works of this evil indwelling principle in detail. *Now the deeds of the flesh are obvious, which are sexual immorality, impurity, indecency, idol worship, witchcraft, hatred, strife, jealousy, fits of rage, self-seeking, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like.*

rebellious, ravenous beast with its own mind, totally contrary to God and hell-bent on our destruction.

There is no person on earth who does not carry this monster around with them. Listen to one Christian (*one of the greatest Christians who ever lived*) express his frustration at being caught up in the inner struggle between his *old man* and his *new man*. It kind of looks like he has split-personality disorder:

I do not understand what I am doing. I am not doing the things I want to do, but I am doing the very things I hate ... For the good things that I want to do, I don't do, but I do the very evil things that I don't want to do. But if I do the very thing I don't want to do, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which resides in me. (Romans 7:15-20)

This inner monster is the power that used to rule and reign over us before we were born again, before we invited God to take over. The monster demanded to be fed constantly and was the thing that made us fundamentally selfish at the core of our being.

The good news is that, although this evil monster may be present in all of us, it does not define us anymore. We are no longer monsters, we are saints. The monster is eventually going to be removed from us, but for the time being, we must master it. If we don't, we can still fall into anything we did before we got saved.

As Christians, we must learn how to allow the new life principle—God's Spirit—to rule and reign over us and how to subdue that old life principle—the sinful nature/the flesh/the old man. This is why the Bible says,

But I tell you, walk in the Spirit, and you will not fulfill the desires of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the

Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh. These two are opposed to one another, so that you may not do what you please. (Galatians 5:16-17)

The monster (*the flesh, the old man*) is irrational and destructive and will completely wreck us if we allow it to. Don't kid yourself ...

Don't be deceived; God won't be mocked; whatever a man sows, he will also reap. For the man who sows to the flesh will reap corruption. (Galatians 6:7-8)

The fact is that even the holiest person is capable of the most heinous sins if they don't keep the monster in check. It is in you, and it is in me ... and it is more wicked than you can imagine. And this monster will never change—you can't train it, you can't reform it, and you can't starve it. *Then how do we control it?* The answer is so incredibly simple that many people completely miss it.

IT CAN'T BE THAT EASY!

If you really want to take away the monster's power, here is what you do—simply believe that it is no longer your master and no longer has any power over you. It cannot make you do anything. The Bible clearly states that somehow, mysteriously, through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, the power and influence of the flesh over you has been utterly shattered. It may be present in you, but for all intents and purposes, its ability to control you has been broken and it cannot *force* you to do anything. According to the apostle Paul, we are dead to its power.

How can we who died to sin still live in it? Or are you ignorant ... ? (Romans 6:2-3)

Think of it this way—before God saved you, the sinful flesh was your slave master. The flesh used to order you around, and you felt powerless to resist its demands. But now you have given yourself to a new Master—an *all-good and all-powerful Master*. Your new Master has utterly shattered the rule and reign of the old man, the flesh. But, you need to stand in this truth, because that wicked old master is still hanging around trying to influence you.

You and I need to embrace the reality that we now have the power and the authority to look that old slave master in the eye and say, *Shut up flesh. You can't tell me what to do anymore. You are dead to me. I am changed, and my life is under new management.* If we do this with faith and authority, something supernatural happens, and the old man, the flesh, will just skulk back into the shadows.

For all of this to be a reality in your life, however, you have to really believe (have faith in) what the Bible says about the issue. If you are born again, you are changed, and the flesh/the old man has been put out of a job. Believe it and receive it! This may sound too simple to really fix anything, but just try it. The more you believe it, the more it works.

In the kingdom of God, we lay hold of every spiritual blessing *by faith* (a.k.a., *believing*). You are saved *by faith*, you appropriate all God's promises *by faith*, and you also walk in victory over sin *by faith*. Faith is a tragically forgotten principle in our day. Previous generations of Christians understood it much better than we do today (and we will go into this a lot more in the next chapter).⁴

⁴ There was an amazing work of God in the 1800s, affecting hundreds of thousands of people. It has come to be known as "The Keswick Movement." It put this idea at the very center of its teaching. *The quest for victory over every known besetment, and for fullness of power in Christian service, led to a re-examination of the Scriptural teaching*

It is absolutely vital that we get ahold of the New Testament notion of faith. Without it, we should expect nothing. *Without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:3)*. This means that if you don't believe what God says about an issue, nothing will happen. The Bible clearly tells us that the Word of God is of no benefit to us if it is not united to faith (*Hebrews 4:2*). The importance of this kind of faith is confirmed so many times in the New Testament that it's a wonder so many people miss it.

But let him ask in faith without any doubting. Because the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, blown around by the wind. Don't let that person expect to receive anything from the Lord, being doubleminded, unstable in all their ways. (James 1:6)

As you come to embrace by faith what the Bible says—*you are a saint, and sin is no longer master over you*—you will experience more and more supernatural power to *be a saint*.

Knowing this, our old self was crucified with Him (Christ) so that our body of sin might be made powerless so that we should no longer be slaves of sin; for he who has died is free from sin. Now, if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him. ... Even so, think of yourself as dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:6-11)

Agree by faith with what the Bible says about you. Agree by faith that a greater power has now taken hold of you and

concerning holiness. And God, who awakened the sense of need and desire, provided the answer. Herbert Stevenson, ed. *Keswick's Authentic Voice: Sixty-five Dynamic Addresses Delivered at the Keswick Convention 1875-1957* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 14.

has transformed you into a saint. Don't deny these wonderful truths in the name of "being humble"—that is not humility, it is a lie. Agree by faith that Jesus's victory over sin is now your victory over sin. The truth is that if you are born again, you love doing God's will, and you have all the power you need to do it. Again, I know this may sound too good to be true, but you would be hard-pressed to find a Scriptural truth that is stated so many times and in so many ways.

I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. (Galatians 2:20)

Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. (Galatians 5:24-25)

Think of the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire. (Col. 3:5)

What does this mean in practical terms? It means that the next time you are tempted to lust, drink, lie, or hate, first think about who you really are—a holy one, changed on the inside, with the desire and the power to do what is right. Changing your mindset here takes practice, but it will soon become automatic. You will find yourself saying, *Why would I want to do that? I am a saint who loves the will of God, and besides that, sin's power over me has been broken.* Just declaring the facts is often enough to squash temptation like a cockroach. Now that you are no longer *ignorant (Romans 6:3)*, try it and see what happens.

This is the first and greatest strategy for overcoming sin. So let's see if you really got it. If you are truly born again, go look at yourself in the mirror and say in faith,

I am a saint. At the very deepest level of my being, I have been changed. I now have the desire and the power to do God's will. The power of my old nature, the flesh, has been broken because Jesus's death has freed me.

Let me be as blunt as I can be here. If a born-again Christian isn't willing to look in the mirror and say, *I am a saint*, then they are living a lie. They believe they are something that they are not. If you believe that your fundamental identity is "sinner," you will continue to feel and act like a sinner. But if you embrace your new identity, you will begin to live more and more like a saint ... and there are other useful strategies to help you live this out.

THE REST OF THE STRATEGIES

No one is very good at the whole *saint* thing early on, but our ability to live like a saint will improve with time, sort of like playing the piano or learning a new language. Even as we begin to embrace our new identity, strong temptations will still arise (note: temptation is not sin, it is just the pull toward sin). If Jesus Himself was tempted, we can't assume we will ever be out of the woods. He was *tempted in all things as we are (Hebrews 4:15)*.

How then do we stay on top of temptation? If we combine the truth that we are saints with the remaining strategies, we will be well on our way to victory. Just like wrestling moves, many of the remaining strategies seem to work together and sort of overlap one another, but they are all unique enough to be considered on their own. Meditate on them prayerfully and consider how you might implement them in your own life.

STRATEGY 2: THE WORD

I have treasured your word in my heart so that I will not sin against you. (Psalm 119:11)

The great evangelist D.L. Moody (1837-1899) used to say, *The Bible will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from the Bible.* When Jesus had His showdown with the devil in the wilderness, He demonstrated just how valuable a thoroughgoing knowledge of Scripture is. He beat down Satan's temptations with, *It is written ... It is written ... (Matthew 4:1-11).* The Word of God not only defeats the devil, it reframes our entire outlook on life and develops in us the mind of Christ. In short, our very life depends on it. Jesus said:

Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. (Matthew 4:4)

When I disciple young people, I insist that they develop the habit of spending at least one hour a day in the Bible. This only sounds extreme to people who don't understand how vital the Word of God really is. It is God's primary tool for remolding and reshaping us into His image, changing our scrambled brains into the mind of Christ. A deep knowledge of the Bible transforms us from spiritual babies into mature adults. Apart from it, a Christian will forever be ignorant, weak, vulnerable, and easily deceived.

Like newborn babies, long for pure spiritual milk so that by it you may grow up in your salvation. (1 Peter 2:2)

The Bible may come second in our discussion here, but apart from it, we could not understand strategy number one ... or any other strategy, for that matter. The fact is that

coming to know the Bible is absolutely foundational to everything you are as a disciple of Jesus Christ. The Bible may be huge and intimidating, but if you want to have victory over sin, *know the Word deeply!*

STRATEGY 3: PRAYER

Pray this way ... Don't lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. (Matthew 6:9-13)

As important as a deep knowledge of the Bible is, you cannot really say that it is more important than prayer. One thing is obvious from Scripture and Christian history—people who know how to pray overcome, and those who don't learn to pray don't overcome. This is why I insist that the young people I disciple develop the habit of spending at least one hour a day in prayer (in addition to their time in the Word). This isn't some sort of rigid legalism—it's about survival. I often say, *If you pray for an hour a day, you will at least be in the game, spiritually speaking.*

The Bible says that Jesus Himself was tempted in every way that we are, yet He never sinned (*Hebrews 4:15*). How did He overcome? He used the awesome weapon of prayer. He gives us a vivid example of this in the Garden of Gethsemane just before His crucifixion. There in the garden, He overcame excruciating temptation and found the strength to push through to the cross ... and He did it in prayer. He wrestled on His knees until He sweat drops of blood, and He got the breakthrough. It was there that He found the strength to say to His Father, *Not My will, but yours be done (Matthew 26:39)*. Here again, Jesus is showing us how it's done. The temptation is overcome in prayer. (It is also worth noting that at this most critical juncture, Jesus instructed His

disciples to do the same. *Pray so that you don't enter into temptation [Matt 26:41]. They failed to listen, and failed.)*

Prayer is where we exercise our faith, it is where we overcome the devil, and it is where we gain new wisdom and insight from the Holy Spirit. Prayer is the way we receive virtually every spiritual blessing from God, including the strength to stand against sin. We may think we don't have time for long hours in prayer, but the truth is that if you want to have victory, *spend regular time in prayer!*

STRATEGY 4: CONFESSION

Therefore, Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed. (James 5:16)

Confession is a commonly overlooked channel of grace, but it is often God's appointed way to set us free from besetting temptations and sins. When we have some vice that keeps getting the best of us—impurity, gluttony, bitterness—we shouldn't assume that we can overcome it all by ourselves (because if it didn't work the last 1,000 times, it probably isn't going to work now). Keeping it to ourselves often causes it to fester and grow like a rotten wound. It may very well be that what we need to do is find some Christian friends we can trust, humble ourselves, show them the filthy thing, and let them pray for us.

The one who hides his sins will not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them will receive mercy. (Proverbs 28:13)

The Bible repeatedly says that God's grace is released to those who are humble (*James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5-6; Proverbs 3:34*). There is little in life more humbling than being open and honest about our weaknesses and failures. Now, we need

to be wise about this—this doesn't mean we indiscriminately vomit every dark detail of our life onto the entire church. What it does mean is that there will be times in our lives when we need to “come clean” as God's Spirit leads us. When appropriate, we do as the book of James commands and confess our sins to other believers and allow them to pray for our healing.

It is worth noting that many of the greatest moves of God on earth ignited when God's people began openly confessing their sins and struggles. We do not have time to go over the history here, but there is something supernatural and wonderful about God's children coming clean with one another. And one more thing. Often when one person is honest enough to share some struggle in their life, it's like a dam breaks—there are usually a bunch of people in the room who need to do the same thing. It may be hard and humbling to do, but if you want to have victory over sin, *confess your sins to others*.

STRATEGY 5: GET HELP FROM THE STRONG

If anyone is snared in a sin, you who are spiritual restore this one. (Galatians 6:1)

If you are stuck in sin, be willing to allow one or two mature, godly individuals to enter into the battle with you. Virtually every Christian (*EVERY CHRISTIAN!*) has been stuck in some sin issue that they just can't seem to get out of. The Bible gives us clear instructions here—get some mature saints into the mix, those with experience and wisdom. What seems like an unwinnable battle for you might be small potatoes for them. Your “impossible struggle” might be something they overcame decades ago

and have since helped many people get out of. Be open to the idea that there are some really wise folks out there, saints who know a whole lot of things you don't. Chances are they would absolutely love to help you out, and in the process, you will probably make a lifelong friend. (Tip: How do you know who these spiritual people are? Ask around. They come highly recommended because they have a track record of helping others.) If you want to have victory over sin, *get help from the strong*.

STRATEGY 6: FLEE

Run from youthful lusts, and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace. (2 Timothy 2:22)

This strategy is sort of a no-brainer. When things get hot and heavy ... *just run!* Literally, get up and go. Leave the premises. Get in your car and drive away. Walk out of the party. Leave your boyfriend's/girlfriend's apartment. When it involves powerful sins of the flesh, your very best option is to do like Joseph in the Bible and hightail it out of there (*Genesis 39:12*). There are times in your life when you are supposed to stand, and there are times when trying to stand is just plain stupid. Don't overestimate yourself. You will live to regret it. In these situations, don't stand there praying for strength. Don't rebuke the devil. Just get out. Run!

And one more thing. There will never be a time in your life when God does not provide an escape hatch for you. If you are willing to run, He will always give you a way out—it's a promise:

No temptation has overtaken you, except that which is common to mankind. And God is faithful; He will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able to

endure, but with every temptation, He will provide the way of escape so that you can endure it. (1 Cor. 10:13)

If you want to have victory over sin, *flee!*

STRATEGY 7: DEAL RUTHLESSLY WITH SIN

If your hand makes you stumble, cut it off. (Matthew 5:30)

Jesus says some pretty extreme things in His most famous sermon, The Sermon on the Mount (*Matthew 5-7*). Nothing He says sounds more extreme than suggesting that we gouge out our eyes or cut off our hands to avoid sin. The truth is that cutting off body parts isn't actually a remedy for sin. Jesus was using hyperbole. But He was telling us to deal ruthlessly with our sin. Don't mess around with it and do whatever it takes to get victory over it. *It is better for you to lose one body part than for your whole body to be thrown into hell (Matthew 5:29).*

Again, getting control over sin is not about removing hands and eyes. First and foremost, it's about getting control over our inner life. To do this, it would seem obvious that we should remove those external things around us that trigger temptation. And we need to act as if this is a matter of life or death because it really is. *When sin has fully run its course, it results in death (James 1:15).* Sin is no joke. It will kill you. Battle it ruthlessly, using all appropriate biblical weapons and strategies. Cutting off your hand or gouging out your eye won't help, but cutting off certain relationships could. Moving out of your apartment or quitting your job at the club might. Whatever you have to do, do it! If you want to have victory over sin, *deal ruthlessly with it!*

STRATEGY 8: CLEAN UP YOUR ENVIRONMENT

*Give no opportunity to the flesh with regards to its lusts.
(Romans 13:14)*

There are things around you right now—in your apartment, in your car, on your computer, or phone—that regularly tempt you to sin. If you are serious about holiness, stop flirting around with them. Clean up your environment. Throw them in the dumpster, burn them, or cancel your subscription. Figure out what around you is making it easier for you to sin and put the axe to it. If it is an app on your phone, delete it. If it is unrestricted internet, put controls on it. Sure, you may lose some money, it may “cramp your style,” and you may have to give up “rights,” but is anything really worth that continual feeling of failure and defeat?

When I was a young man, I realized that I kept stumbling over things I watched on TV, so I took my new TV out to the dumpster and smashed it with a car jack handle. I was once discipling two brothers who realized they were addicted to video games. They took their console out to a field and annihilated it by using it for target practice. Some people might shake their heads and say such actions are a little extreme, and perhaps they are, but I think God was smiling. God’s problem is not that He has too many people pushing too hard. His problem is that so many of His kids are doing next to nothing for the sake of holiness. If you want to have victory over sin, *clean up your environment!*

STRATEGY 9: GODLY FRIENDS

The one who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm. (Proverbs 13:20)

It is a fact that we become like the people we hang around with. This is why the apostle warns, *Bad company corrupts good character (1 Corinthians 15:33)*. If you want to overcome sin in your life, make the decision today to seek out those who inspire you to lead a courageous, committed, godly life. Distance yourself from those who cause you to stumble, or who are just plain sluggish in their spiritual lives. Readjusting your social circle can be painful, but it is a must for every serious disciple of Jesus.

John Wesley (1703-1791) was without question one of the most influential Christians of the last 500 years. When he was a young man, an older saint gave him a great piece of advice. He told Wesley, *Sir, you wish to serve God ... Remember, you cannot serve Him alone. You must therefore find companions or make them. The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion.* As a rule, it is God's will that we find people on the same path and lock arms with them. Wesley did this, and he and his friends shook the world. If you want to have victory over sin, *find godly friends!*

STRATEGY 10: ACCOUNTABILITY GROUPS

Let us consider how to spur one another on to love and good deeds. (Hebrews 10:24)

This strategy is a bit like the last one but a little more specific. One powerful way to overcome sin is to become part of an accountability group, a band of brothers or sisters that you can be completely open and honest with. In this little circle, you can make sure you are walking in holiness and regularly practicing all the other strategies. Pick a specific time during the week—like breakfast on Tuesday—and spend an hour or so together. Pray for each other, confess

sins and temptations, and encourage each other from the Word.

Anyone who has been in the kingdom of God very long knows that this is one of the best ways to attain spiritual goals. It can keep us disciplined and on track in our study of the Bible and prayer, and it helps us over-come specific areas of weakness. If you want to have victory over sin, *join an accountability group!*

LET'S GET PRACTICAL

So there you have it, one grand principle and nine strategies for overcoming sin. If you train your mind to adopt these attitudes and habits, you can successfully live out your identity in Christ. You are a saint now. These strategies will ensure that you live like one. Prayerfully review the list, and very specifically determine how you are going to live these things out. Here is the list with a few “for example” applications because if you don’t get very specific, nothing will change.

1. Believe you are a saint (*Go ahead, look at yourself in the mirror and say it!*)
2. Know the Word (*I am going to begin taking ½ hour a day to memorize the book of James*)
3. Pray (*I am going to wake up at 5 a.m. daily to pray*)
4. Confess
5. Get help from the strong (*I am going to call my pastor’s wife and open up about my eating disorder*)
6. Flee
7. Deal ruthlessly with sin (*I am going to quit my job at the club, even though the money is good*)

8. Clean up your environment (*I will delete that social media app*)
9. Find godly friends
10. Join an accountability group (*I am going to ask Tom, Chuck, and Ernesto ...*)

Down through history, there have been times when God's people have gotten deadly serious about holiness ... and God has come in power. We will wrap up this chapter with just one account of this happening in the early 1950s in the Hebrides Islands off the coast of Scotland. It reads like an account straight out of the New Testament. Could it happen again? Of course it could.

A certain young man, a deacon in the church, got up and read Psalm 24. "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart ..." And then that young man closed his Bible. And looking down at the minister and the elders, he spoke these crude words ... "It seems to me to be so much humbug to be praying as we are praying, to be waiting as we are waiting, if we ourselves are not rightly related to God." And then he lifted up his two hands and prayed, "God, are my hands clean? Is my heart pure?" But he got no further. That young man fell to his knees and then fell into a trance ... When that happened in the barn, the power of God swept into the parish. And an awareness of God gripped the community, such as hadn't been known for over 100 years. —Duncan Campbell (1898-1972)⁵

⁵ From sermon, *Revival in the Hebrides* (1968), by Duncan Campbell. (listen at www.sermonaudio.com/saplayer/playpopup.asp?SID=5562)

4

KEY FOUR: GOD-MOVING PRAYER

How do I pray in a way that actually works?

What the Church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more and novel methods, but men whom the Holy Ghost can use—men of prayer, men mighty in prayer. The Holy Ghost does not flow through methods but through men. He does not come on machinery but on men. He does not anoint plans, but men—men of prayer. —E.M. Bounds (1835-1913)¹

GOD WILL SAVE THE DAY

As old schooler R.A. Torrey put it, *Prayer can do anything God can do.*² I have come to believe deeply that God not only has all the power to help us, but He is also more than willing to break in and rescue us if we would only pray

¹ E.M. Bounds, *Power Through Prayer* (London: Marshall Brothers Ltd., 1912), 10.

² *Prayer can do anything God can do; for the arm of God responds to the touch of prayer. All the infinite resources of God are at the command of prayer.* R.A. Torrey, *How to Obtain Fullness of Power* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1897), 83. See also his books *How to Pray*, and *The Power of Prayer and the Prayer of Power*.

rightly. The fact is that I am still not all that good at praying, but I would be lying if I said I have not seen God smash in and save the day on numerous occasions—provision, guidance, peace, power, healing, salvations, victory over sin, deliverance, etc.³ For example ...

KEVIN'S COCAINE ADDICTION

My friend Kevin grew up in a hellish home. As a little boy, he lived in perpetual terror that his mentally unstable dad was going to murder him. Imagine being a little kid and wondering if this is the day when dad chokes the life out of you or beats it out of you. When Kevin was a teenager, he discovered marijuana and said it was sweet relief—a little vacation from his psychotic father. You can probably guess where the story goes from here. It wasn't long before his “sweet relief” had morphed into a full-blown battle with cocaine.

Kevin and I became fast friends when he was living in a Christian halfway house, a place for recovering addicts to reacclimate to society. I went there to teach weekly Bible studies, and Kevin and I hit it off. He soon prayed to surrender to Jesus, and I had the privilege of baptizing him. But that cocaine thing kept coming up again and again. It was like some evil parasite that we just couldn't extract. I knew he was saved, and I knew he wanted to do God's will, but this addiction seemed too powerful to overcome.

I was praying by myself one day, and my thoughts turned to Kevin. I began to see this addiction as Satan's strategy to

³As a young Christian, a little book that got me started in a life of prayer, and introduced me to many of the old schoolers, was Dick Eastman's *No Easy Road* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971). This is usually the first book on prayer I recommend to young disciples.

humiliate one of God's beloved children and spit in God's face. I started to get mad ... no, I got downright furious. I prayed like I seldom have before or since. A strange confidence rose up inside me (the old schoolers called it faith). I demanded—yes, *demanded*—that God the Father do what any good father would do in a situation like this—*GO AND RESCUE YOUR SON!* I wasn't being disrespectful, and I wasn't complaining. I was just stating what seemed crystal clear to me at the time.

If you, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him? (Matthew 7:11)

A good father has a responsibility to step in and rescue his son, so I yelled, I cried, and I demanded ... and God moved (just like the Bible says He will). *Call on Me in the day of trouble; I will rescue you, and you will honor Me (Psalm 50:15).*

The next day I saw Kevin at church. He ran up to me and said, *You will never believe what happened to me last night.* He continued, *I was at the AA house playing cards, and the glory of God came down over me. He just ripped the desire to do crack right out of me.* Kevin went on to tell me that a Christian lady who was there that night could even see it and asked, *What's happening to you?*

I said to Kevin, *Let me tell you what I was doing last night.* I shared with him about my time of intense prayer about his addiction, and we both just stood there dumbfounded, shaking our heads. To this day, years later, we still talk about it—*Remember that time?* (Anyone who wants confirmation of this story, I would be happy to give you Kevin's phone number.)

I believe that if the coming generation rediscovered the biblical teaching on faith and prayer, there would be a lot more “Kevin stories” in our churches.⁴ As I said, I’m not even that good at prayer, but over the years, I have seen some wild and amazing things. The Bible teaches us that God gave us prayer so we could invite Him into our troubles ... so we could move His hand.

MOVING GOD’S HAND

From the very outset, we need to get some clarity. What are we talking about when we refer to the idea of prayer? What does it mean, biblically speaking? Plain and simple, when the idea of prayer is referred to in Scripture, it is almost always talking about this—MOVING GOD TO ACTION, or in biblical terms, MOVING GOD’S HAND.

Stretch out Your hand to heal, and let signs and wonders take place through the name of your holy servant Jesus.
(Acts 4:30)

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus expresses concern that a time will come when people will forget how to pray effectively. He tells a parable about how to move God and then concludes by basically asking, *When I come back at the end of time, will anyone really know how to do this?*

Now, will not God set things right for His chosen ones who cry to Him day and night? I tell you that He will set them right, and He will do it quickly. However, when the

⁴ One of the great praying churches in the United States is The Brooklyn Tabernacle in New York. For a life-changing sermon on the subject, listen online to Pastor Jim Cymbala’s “House of Prayer” (<https://youtu.be/U79YOKje2zU>).

Son of Man returns, will He find any faith on earth? (Luke 18:7-8)

Over the last 100 years or so, Jesus's concern has become a reality in many parts of God's church. Few churches even have prayer meetings anymore. Not so long ago, Christians like John Hyde, George Müller, E.M. Bounds, D.L. Moody, Hudson Taylor, Andrew Murray, and many others knew how to do it. If the next generation would only listen to them and look again with fresh eyes at the Scripture, this world would shake.

Many teachings out there tell us that prayer is about everything BUT moving God's hand—*being still before God, refocusing our mind, or submitting to God's mysterious will*. As pious as all this may sound, it just doesn't line up with the testimony of Scripture (check it out for yourself). I don't deny that prayer can involve other things—like praise, thanksgiving, and confession. But from Genesis to Revelation, most prayers are attempts to move God to action. They are cries for God to break in and save the day—guide, provide, protect, defeat the enemy, heal, etc. Let's check out some of the heaviest hitters in the Bible and see how and why they prayed. (*So, what if a person's theology stands in the way of praying like this? Answer: They should humbly ask God if they have been duped.*)

BIBLICAL EVIDENCE

There is arguably no Old Testament hero of greater stature than Moses. Do we have any accounts of him praying? Yes, and as a rule, his prayers are attempts to move God to action. He prays to stop plagues (*Exodus 8:8-13, Numbers 11:2*). He prays for food (*Numbers 11:11-32*). He

prays to heal his sister Miriam from leprosy (*Numbers 12:13-14*). He prays for God to reveal Himself (*Exodus 33:13*). On two occasions, Moses's prayer keeps the sinful nation of Israel from total annihilation (*Exodus 32:11-14; Numbers 14:17-20*). The inescapable conclusion? Moses prays to move God.

What about other heavy hitters like Elijah, one of the most famous of all God's prophets in the Old Testament? What does the evidence show? His prayers move God. The dead are raised when he prays (*1 Kings 17:17-24*). God changes the weather when Elijah prays. After a three-and-a-half-year drought, for instance, he convinces God to cut loose the rain, and God does it (*1 Kings 18:41-46*).

Elijah may be best known for his battle on Mount Carmel with the 450 false prophets of Baal. His prayer in that "heaven versus hell" power struggle is worth quoting here. What is he doing? He is moving God to action, moving God's hand.

O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, today let it be known that You are God in Israel, and that I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your word. Answer me, LORD, answer me, so that this people may know that You, LORD, are God and that you have turned their heart back again. (1 Kings 18:36b-37)

What does God do in response to Elijah? *Then the fire of the LORD fell (1 Kings 18:38)*, and God's people turned back to Him again.

One of my favorite accounts of prayer in the entire Bible happens when the godly king Hezekiah joins forces with the prophet Isaiah in prayer. The world superpower Assyria was surrounding Jerusalem, mocking God and His people (*2 Chronicles 32:13*). Humanly speaking, the case was

hopeless, but they knew how to pray, and they moved God to action:

But King Hezekiah and Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, prayed about this and cried out to heaven. And the LORD sent an angel who destroyed every mighty warrior, commander, and officer in the camp of the king of Assyria. (2 Chronicles 32:20-21)

Why did God leave so many accounts like this in our Bible? So that we would be inspired to move His hand, too—to *save, heal, guide, provide, and protect.*

I could spend pages and pages reviewing the biblical evidence, but I recommend you do this for yourself. Study the life of great men like Abraham and David, or great women like Hannah and Anna, and you will see that their prayers move God. In one of the great prayers of the Bible, the prophet Daniel cries, *O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and move! (Daniel 9:19).* Prayer moves God.

The basic thrust does not change at all when we come to the New Testament—*people pray to move God.* Jesus’s teaching on prayer only reaffirms again and again what the Old Testament says (*Luke 11:5-10; 18:1-8*). In fact, the New Testament tells us to look back to that great “God-mover” Elijah as our model for prayer (*James 5:16-18*).

Because prayer moves God to action, the New Testament letters are filled with admonitions to pray. They tell us to be devoted to prayer (*Colossians 4:2*), to be clear-headed for the purpose of prayer (*1 Peter 4:7*). They tell us to pray without ceasing (*1 Thessalonians 5:17*) and *pray at all times in the Spirit ... with all perseverance and petition for all the saints (Ephesians 6:18).* The Bible makes it clear that lack of prayer will lead to lack of blessing (*James 4:2*), and it tells us that if we do it right, amazing things will happen.

Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. (James 5:16)

It's no surprise that Jesus's early followers always seemed to be praying. Whenever they got together, they prayed (*Acts 1:14; 2:42*). When they needed wisdom for major decisions, they prayed (*Acts 1:24-25*). When they needed God to break one of their leaders out of prison, they prayed (*Acts 12:1-19*). When they needed power and courage to fulfill their mission ... you get the picture.

And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak God's word with boldness. (Acts 4:31)

Why did the early church have all-night prayer meetings? Why did the most powerful Christians in history pray for hours every day? The simple answer is that they believed what the Scriptures teach about prayer—it moves God.

One of the greatest missionaries of all time, John Hyde (1865-1912), was in the habit of praying for hours every day for lost souls. He was also in the habit of leading an average of four souls to Christ every single day. There was no question in his mind that his success at winning souls was directly tied to his praying. He knew that he could move God. This is how he prayed:

But near the closet of John Hyde, we are permitted to hear the sighing and the groaning and to see the tears coursing down his dear face, to see his frame weakened by foodless

*days and sleepless nights, shaken with sobs as he pleads,
“O God, give me souls or I die.”*⁵

Our Bible-believing, born-again forebears, those people I call the old schoolers, knew many things that today’s Christians have lost sight of. For one thing, they knew how to move God. This is precisely why they were willing to put the same sort of blood, sweat, and tears into their prayers that Jesus and His apostles did. *He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears (Hebrews 5:7)*. But make special note of this: It’s not just about praying or praying more, it’s about praying *right*.

PRAYING RIGHT

*As long as we look on prayer chiefly as the means of maintaining our own Christian life, we shall not know fully what it is meant to be. But when we learn to regard it as the highest part of the work entrusted to us, the root and strength of all other work, we shall see that there is nothing that we so need to study and practice as the art of praying aright.
—Andrew Murray (1828-1917)*⁶

Virtually everyone on earth prays, but very few people today can move God as Elijah did. The simple fact is that if we aren’t praying to move God’s hand, we will never see any miracles. If we are only praying “to be still before God” or “to surrender to God’s mysterious plan,” we will not see God *rip the heavens open and come down (Isaiah 64:1)*.

⁵ Francis McGaw, *Praying Hyde* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1970), 16.

⁶ Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer* (Toronto: A.G. Watson, 1885), vi.

We really need to focus on what the Bible says about praying correctly from here on out. We can't cover the subject comprehensively, but two absolutely vital principles will be addressed below: 1. praying in faith, and 2. praying in purity. Without these two pillars in place, our prayers will go nowhere.

RECOVERING THE BIBLICAL NOTION OF “FAITH”

And without faith, it is impossible to please God, for the one who comes to Him must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him. (Hebrews 11:6)

One principle that has arguably been abused, misused, and misunderstood more than almost any in our time is the New Testament notion of *faith*. Getting ahold of this is essential for anyone who wants to see God move in power. This is a subject that the biblical heroes understood but that has been “lost in the sauce” of bad teaching today. To be blunt, without this awesome, mysterious, powerful thing called *faith*, our prayer efforts go nowhere. Again, this is what the Bible says:

But let him ask in faith without any doubting. Because the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, blown around by the wind. Don't let that person expect to receive anything from the Lord, being doubleminded, unstable in all their ways. (James 1:6)

In the Bible, faith (Gk. *pístis*) usually just means belief. When it is placed in the right thing, like a promise from God, faith sets off His supernatural power. Believe it, and you receive it. It's like lighting a fuse. On the flipside, the Bible

says that without faith, we can expect no miracles from God. If you don't believe it, you won't receive it. There is so much biblical support for this idea that it is a wonder anyone misses it, but they do. Let's check some of the evidence.

On one occasion, Jesus's disciples were stuck. There was a kid with massive demonic problems, and they just couldn't figure out how to help him. Jesus eventually shows up on the scene and the boy's father fills Jesus in on the details. *I brought him to your disciples, and they could not cure him (Matthew 17:16).*

Jesus seems to be more than a bit exasperated at the whole situation. Why? The text makes it perfectly clear—the disciples failed because their faith failed. Read on. Jesus says, *O faithless and perverted generation, how long will I be with you? How long will I put up with you? Bring him here to Me (Matthew 17:17).* Jesus proceeds to heal the boy and then tells the disciples why they couldn't get it done. The explanation couldn't be much clearer—they didn't have faith. (They evidently didn't fully believe what Jesus told them in *Matthew 10:1.*)

Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" And He said to them, "Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you." (Matthew 17:19-20)

For some reason, many Christians today are offended by this notion that miracles simply won't happen, that God won't act if people don't believe (have faith). What I have discovered over the years is that many (most?) of these offended folks had a similar experience—at some point in

their life, they hit a horrible tragedy. They tried to pray in faith, and nothing happened—no healing, no deliverance, or provision. They lost the job, the house, or the spouse. This disappointment then led them to conclude that *faith* doesn't always deliver.

The hard truth is that no matter what sort of heartache or failure we may have gone through in our past, our experience does not get to trump the clear teaching of Scripture ... and the Bible is pretty clear about how this all works. In the Bible, God *always* responds to right belief (faith), and there is not one single occasion in the New Testament where it says that a person has faith and does not get what they are seeking. On the flip side, the Bible repeatedly says a lack of faith short circuits the power of God. Again, check this out for yourself. There is really no good biblical evidence to the contrary. Anyone willing to do the research will find that this notion of faith runs all the way through the Scripture.

In the Gospels, Jesus wasn't able to do miracles in His hometown. Why? It wasn't because He didn't want to. It was because they didn't believe (have faith). *And He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith (Matthew 13:58)*. Do you remember when Peter walked on water? It worked perfectly until his faith gave out. After Jesus rescues him, He says, *O you of little faith, why did you doubt? (Matthew 14:31)*. When miracles happen in Jesus's ministry, He says things like this, *O woman, your faith is great, let the thing you want be done for you (Matthew 15:28)*.

On the other hand, when people don't believe, it frustrates Jesus, as if it ties His hands.⁷ In the Gospel of

⁷ *How is it possible that God Almighty can have His hands tied? Can't He do anything He wants to? Absolutely. And this is what He wanted to*

Mark, lack of faith stymied Jesus's ability to help people, and the text says, *He was amazed at their lack of faith (Mark 6:6)*. When Jesus teaches on prayer, He drives home the vital importance of real faith.

Believe in God! Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, "Be taken up and thrown into the sea," and doesn't doubt in his heart, but has faith that what he says is going to happen, it will be done for him. So I say to you, all the things you pray for and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be given to you. (Mark 11:22-24)

This may not be a popular teaching today, but anyone who ever hopes to see miracles needs to hammer through the biblical evidence and learn what faith really is and how to uncork the supernatural with it. (Remember Jesus's concern in Luke 18—*Will anyone know how to do this when He returns?*) The apostle Paul speaks of religion in the last days—*holding to a form of religion, although they have denied its power (2 Timothy 3:5)*. Any religion that loses sight of how faith really works will certainly find itself in this sad state.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

There is a lot of misguided teaching out there today about what faith is and what it isn't. I'm sure this is because the devil knows that faith is one of the church's greatest weapons. Some biblical teachers today say that faith is resignation to whatever happens, and so people should always tack the phrase *if it be Thy will* onto their requests.

do—create a world where people cooperate with Him, and invite Him in with their faith.

One of the great Christians of the last century, Brother Andrew, disparagingly refers to this error as “Christian fatalism.”⁸

Another group of teachers says that faith is a force we need to harness and that it allows us to pretty much get whatever we want from God. This is often referred to as “name it and claim it.” Both views are out of step with the Bible and what the greats of Christian history believed. My advice to anyone interested in getting real answers is this—set aside all the modern books and sermons on the subject and start by going through the New Testament with a fine-toothed comb.

CLEARING UP THE FOG

There is a quick way to get clarity on this whole faith thing. How? Just think about our salvation for a moment. If we focus on how faith works with respect to salvation, we can apply it “across the board,” so to speak. All evidence in Scripture is that faith works the same way for every blessing available to us from God, whether it’s salvation, peace of mind, or rent money.

How does a person get saved? Almost anyone in a good Bible-believing church should be able to answer this. You must have absolute confidence (faith/belief) in what the Bible says about the Person and work of Jesus Christ (see Chapter 1).

For God so loved the world, that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes/has faith in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

⁸ See Brother Andrew, *And God Changed His Mind* (Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 1999).

The idea that simple faith is all that is necessary for salvation is one of the revolutionary principles rediscovered in the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. It is referred to as *sola fide* (faith alone), and in a nutshell, it says, *Just believe it, and you will receive it*. As I said, nobody in any good Bible-believing church will argue about this.

*Have faith in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.
(Acts 16:30-31)*

There is no fuzziness about it. No mystery, no hidden contingencies. All a person needs to do is believe/have faith in what the Bible says about Jesus—that He is the Son of God who died on the cross for our sins and rose again—and they are saved. *By grace, you are saved through faith (Ephesians 2:8)*. This is said so many times and in so many ways in the Bible that a person has to be spiritually blind to miss it:

If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe/have faith in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)

So here is what has me flummoxed. Why is it that we are so clear about the nature of faith when we are talking about salvation—*just believe it, and you will receive it*—but all clarity seems to go right out the window when we bring up any other spiritual topic? Ask some properly trained twenty-first century Christian, *Can I know that I am saved?* They will say, *Absolutely. No doubt about it*. But if you ask them if you can have any certainty about, for example, provision, protection, guidance, or power for ministry, they will probably give you some sort of, *God's will is mysterious* speech.

It's as if many Christians today have two categories of faith: 1. The absolute certainty they are supposed to have when it comes to salvation, and 2. The ambiguous hope/wish sort of faith that applies to everything else they want or need from God. In the Bible, however, faith is faith. It doesn't matter if we are praying for salvation, daily bread, or deliverance from depression. When we pray in faith, miracles happen. When we don't, all bets are off. *Let not that man expect to receive anything from the Lord (James 1:7)*. Where does it come from? Do we just work it up ourselves? Do we grit our teeth and try to hope really hard? What is the source of real, God-moving faith?

FAITH IS BASED ON GOD'S WORD

Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ. (Romans 10:17)

In the very simplest terms, we are saved because God offered us something, and we took it. How did He offer it to us? He presented salvation to us via a stack of promises in His Word, the Bible. All those times it tells us, *If you believe in Jesus, He will save you*. Everyone who is truly saved/born again took a look at one or more of those promises and said, *I am going to believe that!* And that's all there was to it—the miracle of salvation took place. This is how we are all born again. *Everyone who has faith in Him ... has eternal life (John 3:16)*.

All we do is simply transfer this process—*believe and receive*—to the rest of the Bible. We look for clear promises that tell us what God wants to do for us, and we believe them—**WE HAVE FAITH!** What sort of promises? Basically, God has given you promises for absolutely

everything you will ever need on this side of heaven. The book of 2 *Peter* tells us that through *God's precious and magnificent promises*, He has given us *everything we need for life and godliness* (2 *Peter* 1:3-4).

Here is just a sampling of some of the things we can claim by faith: We can have total peace of mind (*Philippians* 4:7-8), a light and easy yoke (*Matthew* 11:25-30), victory over Satan (*Romans* 16:19-20 and *James* 4:7), power for Christian service (*Acts* 1:8; *Luke* 11:13), provision for all our needs (*Matthew* 6:26-33; *Philippians* 4:19), protection (*Psalms* 91), guidance (*Proverbs* 3:5-6), wisdom whenever we need it (*James* 1:5), escape from all temptation (2 *Corinthians* 10:13), continual forgiveness (1 *John* 1:9), and many, many, many more.

We take these promises before God (just like we took the promises regarding salvation), and we insist that God do what He said He would do. This isn't rocket science, it's simply not being taught much today. I will say that on occasion, things are a bit more complicated (for example, see 2 *Corinthians* 12:7-10), but it's usually just this simple. Find a promise, or two, or ten, that applies to your situation and pray it until you believe it ... and you will receive. Of course, if we don't know the Word of God, we are up a creek here because we can't have faith in promises we are ignorant of. A massive part of being an effective prayer is being a serious student of the Bible.

Even when we find a clear promise, it may take us a little time to get our minds to where we can really have faith, because our brains are so full of arguments and excuses. This is why sometimes we have to travail and wrestle in prayer. A major part of the process of prayer (the reason it sometimes takes hours, days, weeks) is removing all

obstacles to faith and lining our minds up with God's. The devil will be fighting you tooth and nail here, but once you really get to that place of faith, it's as good as money in the bank (and sometimes it is literally money in the bank). This is unabashedly what the Bible teaches, and this is what the old schoolers did. We will look at some of them in a moment.

And this is the confidence we have before Him. If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us, and we know that if He hears us, we have the request. (1 John 5:14-15)

When we do this—insist that God do what He said He would—we aren't being uppity or irreverent, we are being obedient children. All evidence says that God loves this sort of fervent, insistent praying. The mightiest prayer warriors in history and many of the greatest prayer books in history love to refer to that Old Testament account where the patriarch Jacob wrestles with God. Jacob has the audacity to say to God, *I won't let You go until You bless me!* (Genesis 32:26). God seems to delight in this sort of confidence. It's like He wants us to really push in until we obtain.

The great reformer John Calvin actually encourages this kind of praying in his magnum opus, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In fact, one of the longest chapters in this 3 volume work is devoted to prayer (although I have found almost no one, Calvinists included, who have ever studied this section). Calvin refers to prayer as a kind of God-approved “presumption”—and he says everyone who ever prayed rightly understood how to do it. God wants us to wrestle until we really, really believe ... and then receive.

We must therefore hold fast with both hands if we would pray to any advantage. The only prayer acceptable to God is that which springs, if I may so express it, from the

*presumption of faith and is founded on full assurance of hope.*⁹

Jesus repeatedly tells us to pray in this way—to have faith and not give up until we get what we are after. *He told this parable so that they would pray at all times and not lose heart (Luke 18:1)*. Remember Elijah, the biblical model of faith? He wouldn't take no for an answer. When he was praying for rain, the Bible tells us he prayed, and prayed, and prayed, and prayed, and prayed until he got what he wanted (*1 Kings 18:41-46*). Elijah knew he had the right to do this because what he was praying for lined up perfectly with God's word (*1 Kings 18:1*). This is how it has always been done. *Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ (Romans 10:17)*.

What happens to a person who will not pray this way? The promises of God will do them no good! The book of *Hebrews* tells us that *the word that was preached to them did not profit them because it was not united to faith in those who heard (Hebrews 4:2)*. In short, if we won't claim the promise, we should expect no miracle. I know this may sting ... but let it sting.

This is why so many of God's kids have such a weak, anemic prayer life. They never see the supernatural because: 1. They have never taken the time to find God's promises—they don't know the Bible, or 2. They know the promises of God, but they won't claim them with audacious faith. In both cases, the promises of God are of no benefit to them. How sad! This is one of the most important keys that the next

⁹ *Institutes* 3.20.12. Many find it surprising to learn that John Calvin had such a very dynamic understanding of prayer, as did many of history's greatest Calvinists (Edwards, Whitefield, Brainerd, Spurgeon, Hyde).

generation needs to rediscover to see God move in power. Biblical praying is not primarily about *surrendering to God's mysterious will* or *being quiet in His presence*. It's about finding God's will and moving His hand.

But faith isn't the only key to effective praying. There is something else that anyone who would move God's hand needs to be aware of—willful sin short circuits the whole process. We may have dozens of promises to claim, but if our *hands are not clean* and our *hearts are not pure*, we can pray all day and nothing will happen.

SIN SHUTS EVERYTHING DOWN

*If I treasure sin in my heart, God will not hear me.
(Psalm 66:18)*

There are many great examples in the Old Testament to understand how faith works. One helpful place to turn is the book of *Joshua*. This book is named after the great military man who took over the leadership of Israel after Moses died. Moses is the one who led the people out of their bondage in Egypt and brought them right up to the land God had promised, *a land flowing with milk and honey*. Joshua's job was to lead the people into the Promised Land.

The only problem was that it was full of wicked giants. But not to worry. Joshua was a man of faith, and God gave him a whole stack of promises to bank on. In the first place, God told Joshua and company very clearly that no one would ever be able to defeat them.

Every place on which the sole of your foot treads, I have given it to you ... No man will be able to stand before you all the days of your life ... Be strong and courageous, for

you shall give this people possession of the land which I swore to their fathers. (Joshua 1:3-6)

Joshua's army was a veritable juggernaut, an unstoppable force. Its military record was perfect—almost. There was that one glitch—the battle at a little town called Ai. What happened is instructive for anyone who would venture into the exciting and supernatural world of living and praying in faith. From this historical account, we vividly see that vital truth about faith and how it works—*sin can short circuit the whole operation*. God may give someone like Joshua (or you, or me) amazing, mind-blowing promises that He wants them to experience, but flagrant disobedience to His will negates them. Until they get right—*repent*—the blessing will remain out of reach.

The nation of Israel was promised that they would never lose a battle, and they started off with a bang. The first battle was at the mighty city of Jericho, which was surrounded by massive, impenetrable walls. You can read about it yourself in *Joshua 6*. The God-given battle plan was pretty outrageous, but it worked perfectly. Joshua and the people simply listened to God's word and believed, and God showed up in power. Israel absolutely crushed Jericho.¹⁰

Feeling pretty good about themselves, Joshua and his army then headed for the little podunk town of Ai. After the overwhelming victory at Jericho, they figured they could relax and send in a smaller force. The outcome was so

¹⁰ Why would God ask Israel to wipe out the people living in the land? This goes beyond the scope of this study, but the long and the short of it is that those people were incredibly sick and twisted. Incest, pedophilia, bestiality, and infant sacrifice were all a normal part of their daily lives. They were so far gone, according to the Bible, that the land needed to vomit them out (*Leviticus 18:25*). God had given them more than enough time to repent. They just wouldn't.

unexpected that it left Joshua reeling—Israel was totally humiliated. Many of Joshua’s men lost their lives. For some strange reason, it seemed that all of God’s amazing promises had fallen to the ground. When Joshua hears of the defeat, he falls on his face and essentially cries, *WHY, WHY, WHY?!!!*

God’s response would be almost comical if the circumstances were not so tragic. He simply tells the weeping, blubbering Joshua, *Get up. Why have you fallen on your face? Israel sinned (Joshua 7:10-11)*. It was no mystery to God. The rules have always been the same—when God’s people sin, it short circuits God’s blessings. It’s really quite simple. To “cash in” on the promises of God, you need to be walking in holiness. This is stated again and again and again in Scripture. When God gave Joshua the initial promises, He made this clear:

Be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or the left, so that you may have success wherever you go. (Joshua 1:7)

You and I and Joshua cannot claim any of the promises of God if we are violating God’s clear commands. The problem was obvious, and so was the solution—REPENT! Once Joshua and the people cleaned up the situation, they were back on track—victory after victory after victory. They never lost another battle. In the end, after all their major battles, the final victory/defeat tally was: Israel 12, Wicked Giants 1.

Why did God leave that story in the Bible for us? What are the implications? We always need to keep in mind that willful sin puts the whole blessing thing on pause. There is

so much God wants to give us, but we must come to Him with *clean hands and a pure heart*. If there is known sin in our lives, we will not be able to claim anything from God until we make it right.

Behold, the LORD's hand is not so short that it cannot save; and His ear is not so dull that it cannot hear. But your sins have made a separation between you and your God. (Isaiah 59:1-2)

If My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn away from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and forgive their sins and heal their land. (2 Chronicles 7:14)

Wash your hands, you sinners, and cleanse your hearts, you doubleminded. Be miserable and mourn and weep. Turn your laughter into mourning and your joy to misery. Humble yourself in the Lord's presence, and He will exalt you. (James 4:8-10)

LET'S HEAR FROM THE OLD SCHOOLERS

What is being said in this chapter about faith may seem radical and new to a lot of twenty-first-century Christians, but it is pretty typical stuff in the writings of the old schoolers. I became convinced of this perspective years ago, not only because it is clearly taught in Scripture, but because of the testimonies of virtually everyone I admired in church history. This chapter is just a quick introduction, but if you really want to go to school in the subject, read classics by people like Andrew Murray, E.M. Bounds, R.A. Torrey, Charles Finney, A.T. Pierson, Charles Spurgeon, etc. (One little volume that absolutely every serious Christian should read is the classic *Praying Hyde* by Francis McGaw.)

Anyone familiar with the old schoolers knows that when it comes to faith, there is one name that stands out above all the others—George Müller (1805-98). For an introduction to his amazing life, the book written by his dear friend and admirer A.T. Pierson is a good starting point.¹¹ Quite literally, the eyes of the world were on him and his miracle-working faith. It was said that his death had such a global impact that it could only be measured in latitude and longitude.

Such a departure ... produced a worldwide sensation ... Not in Bristol, or in Britain alone, but across the mighty waters toward the sunrise and sunset was felt the responsive pulse-beat of a deep sympathy. Hearts bled all over the globe when it was announced, by telegraph wire and ocean cable, that George Müller was dead.¹²

He was such a phenomenon that the factories and shops in Bristol, England, closed as thousands were compelled to honor this man with their presence. Nobility and royalty made special efforts to attend, but the most memorable testimony to his life was the hundreds of weeping orphans lining the streets. Through his incredible faith, he had been a father to them all. He prayed in the equivalent of millions of dollars for his Ashley Downs orphan homes and cared for over 10,000 children in his lifetime.

He meticulously documented over 50,000 specific answers to prayer, and friends and associates testified to Müller's ability to even change the weather with his prayers.

¹¹ A.T. Pierson, *George Müller of Bristol* (New York: The Baker and Taylor Co., 1899).

¹² *Ibid*, 285.

Most significantly, he prayed tens of thousands of souls into the kingdom. Müller believed that when he cried out for a person's salvation, God was obliged to answer—based upon His Word. He claimed that in all his years of ministry, God had never failed him on this count. Toward the end of his life, he said, *Thousands of souls have been saved in answer to my prayers ... I shall meet tens of thousands of them in heaven.*¹³

Many people do not know the following fact about Müller. He purposely put his life on public display. He made his life a global spectacle for one very specific reason. These were his own words:

*I have joyfully dedicated my whole life to the object of exemplifying how much may be accomplished by prayer and faith.*¹⁴

He desired to show every Christian what is possible if they would simply learn to move God's hand through believing prayer. These are some of the last recorded words of that amazing man of faith:

The great point is to never give up until the answer comes. I have been praying every day for fifty-two years for two men, sons of a friend of my youth. They are not converted yet, but they will be! How can it be otherwise? There is the unchanging promise of Jehovah, and on that, I rest. The great fault of the children of God is that they do not continue in prayer; they do not go on praying; they do not

¹³ This quote is from the last interview Müller ever gave. Charles R. Parsons, *An Hour with George Müller, The Man of Faith to Whom God Gave Millions*, ed. A. Sims (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1939).

¹⁴ *George Müller of Bristol*, 327.

persevere. If they desire anything for God's glory, they should pray until they get it.

Oh, how good, kind, gracious, and condescending is the One with whom we have to do! He has given me, unworthy as I am, immeasurably above all I have asked or thought! I am only a poor, frail, sinful man, but He has heard my prayers tens of thousands of times and used me as the means of bringing tens of thousands of souls into the way of truth, in this and other lands. These unworthy lips have proclaimed salvation to great multitudes, and very many people have believed unto eternal life.¹⁵

Anyone interested in learning about prayer should study the Scriptures with a completely open heart, and also look to men like Müller, Murray, Hyde, and a host of others from a previous generation, who *though dead, still speak*. If God is going to move again in power, it will come in answer to the prayer of faith.

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FROM JAMES

To wrap up, we turn to the little book of James. This may be the very earliest New Testament writing in our Bible, and it is just chock full of practical advice for hungry believers. The author, Jesus's half-brother, was famous throughout the early church for his powerful prayer life. He spent so much time on his knees in prayer that he was nicknamed "Camel Knees." James lets his readers in on the powerful prayer principles he lived by. Very specifically, five major points found in this epistle serve as a helpful guide for anyone interested in learning the art of moving God's hand.

¹⁵ *An Hour with George Müller.*

1. Just do it: *You do not have because you do not ask. (4:2)*

James makes a brief statement that every Christian should have tattooed on their souls—*You do not have because you do not ask*. The obvious point is this: If you don't make an effort to ask God for things, don't be surprised if you don't get them. Expanding the principle a little, the Christian who doesn't prioritize prayer and set aside time every day for it will never see much.

God has set up His universe so that praying is the way we receive all the good stuff. *Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you (Matthew 7:7)*. All the great saints in history like Müller, Hyde, Murray, and Moody confirm this. They gave God the very best hours of their day. If you and I want to be blessed like they were blessed, we need to do the same.

At some point, we must determine that prayer is going to be one of the top priorities in our life. (*I suggest making it #2 behind knowing the Word.*) We need to then order our life around it and cut out one, two, or three prime hours every day. In this respect, we will be following the example of Jesus: *Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus arose, left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed (Mark 1:35)*. There are haves and have-nots in God's kingdom. Anyone who won't pray will *de facto* be one of the latter. So just do it!

2. Get rid of all known sin: *Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, purify your hearts, you doubleminded. (4:8)*

The early Christians to whom James was writing had stymied their spiritual lives. What was wrong? Sin! Before God could rain down blessings on them, James tells them

that they need to repent. There is simply no use trying to claim the promises of God if we have unconfessed sin—like bitterness, lust, envy, resentment, and pride. God is always willing to forgive us, and repentance keeps the channel of blessing flowing clean and clear. So we should all strive to keep short accounts. Make sure our lives and actions line up with God’s revealed will. Are we walking in holiness and at peace with those around us? For example, in the book of *1 Peter*, the apostle warns husbands to treat their wives properly *so that your prayers will not be hindered (1 Peter 3:7)*. Like any good father, God delights in doing good for us, but He requires that we receive all His blessings with clean hands. When we do this, we are under an open heaven. *No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly (Psalm 84:11)*.

3. Heart check: *You ask and don’t receive because you ask with wrong motives. (4:3)*

This principle is closely related to the last one, but it goes deeper. It’s not just about sinful acts but the heart’s motives. Before we offer any request, we should always ask ourselves, *Are my motives pure?* Jesus said, *Seek first God’s kingdom and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33)*. Every prayer we offer to God should reflect His priorities and relate to His kingdom and His cause on earth. If, for instance, I need a new car, it should be so that God’s will can better be accomplished in my life. If I want a new job, I need to come up with good kingdom reasons for it. As we pray, we should always be checking—*Am I seeking to glorify God? Am I seeking the salvation of the lost? Am I seeking to strengthen and bless His people ... or am I just thinking about myself?* Of course, God wants to meet our personal needs, but it will

probably fall flat if a request has nothing to do with God's Kingdom.

4. Pray in faith: *Pray in faith without any doubting. (1:6)*

In the first chapter of *James*, we are given a clear promise. *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God who gives to all men liberally.* Then we are reminded of one sure way to hinder the blessing—lack of faith. *But let him ask in faith without any doubting.* James goes on to say of the faithless doubter, *Let that man not expect to receive anything from the Lord (1:7).* There will come a day when faith is no longer needed—when we see Jesus face to face—but we sure do need it now. Anyone who wants to experience God's blessing on a regular basis needs to make faith a high priority.

So here it is, one last time—an explanation of how biblical faith works: God has filled His Word, the Bible, with hundreds of promises—all that He wants to do for us. As His blood-bought children, it's our privilege and responsibility to study His Word, find them, and then believe them. If we do this, God will move. *All the promises of God are yes in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20).* On the other hand, if we are ignorant of the promises (because we don't know the Bible), or if we fail to believe the promises, we get nothing, plain and simple.

5. Keep at it: *Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly. (5:17)*

At the end of the book, James points to Elijah as our model of prayer, and one thing we know about Elijah is that he refused to be refused. We don't need to say a whole lot more about this. Just note how Elijah would lock on to a

request like a pit bull and wouldn't let go of God until he got what he was seeking (see *I Kings 18*). This is how Jesus repeatedly teaches us to pray. We need to ensure that our faith doesn't fail in the waiting period between our asking and receiving. If we don't lock on with tenacity and keep after it, we may find ourselves sinking as Peter did. In His love and compassion, Jesus may still keep us from drowning, but with grief and disappointment, He will say:

O you of little faith, why did you doubt? (Matthew 14:31)

A LITTLE NOTE:

So what are we supposed to do when we feel like we have done everything right and don't get what we are praying for? We thought we heard from God, we thought we were claiming His promises with tenacious faith, we came with clean hands and a pure heart ... and we still didn't obtain. Let's just suppose, for example, that I am praying fervently for someone's healing, and they die. Do I then throw in the towel and say, *That whole faith and prayer thing must just not be the way things work?* NO! NO! A THOUSAND TIMES, NO!

If and when we fail to obtain what we are seeking—the *financial blessing, the reconciliation, the healing, the restoration*—we need to be humble and realize there is still an infinite amount we have to learn. On this side of heaven, I believe all of us will have times when we thought we did things properly and we thought we prayed in faith, but we didn't get what we were seeking (in fact, this just happened to me the other day).

In the first place, according to the Bible, the blame often lies squarely on our shoulders—we simply didn't have the wisdom and faith to make it happen. If this happened to the disciples, it will happen to us, too (*Matthew 17:19-20*). Many people get very offended at this suggestion, but I am personally at peace with it.

At other times, God is making a rare exception for some higher purpose, like the situation with Paul's thorn in the flesh (*2 Corinthians 12*). Of course, it wasn't normal for some demonic force to continually harass someone like Paul, but when God explained why He was allowing it, Paul was okay with it. *Most gladly then, I will boast in my affliction (2 Corinthians 12:9)*.

But sometimes we don't have any idea what is going on. What do we do then?

Years ago, I had a pastor friend who continually inspired me with his great faith. He had seen many miracles in his lifetime—salvations, deliverances, provision, and healing. I went to hear him preach once, and at the time I was really struggling because it seemed like God was not coming through for me in a very specific area. In the sermon, he shared about a crisis of faith he once went through. His wife had been pregnant years before, but the baby growing inside her had serious medical complications. They began praying for the little one, and the more they prayed, the more confident they became that God would do a miracle ... but the baby died.

The way my pastor friend handled the situation has stuck with me and become a pillar in my walk with God. Again, I heard him tell this story at a time in my life when I was struggling with a similar issue. My friend said something like this,

What am I supposed to do with the fact that I thought I was praying in faith and my baby died? What am I supposed to do with the fact that I had seen others healed and fully expected a miracle, and it didn't happen? I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT TO DO WITH THAT, BUT I AM GOING TO KEEP ON BELIEVING AND KEEP ON PREACHING AND KEEP ON PRAYING AS I HAVE ALWAYS DONE.

His words brought immediate healing to my soul. I have found many great saints of God throughout history who faced the same dilemma. There are some things we are just going to have to sort out with God on the other side of eternity when we see Him face to face.

We are small and weak and ignorant (*1 Corinthians 13:12*), and there may be times when everything we think we know seems to fall to the ground. Personally, I just assume the problem is with me—and this usually proves to be true. But even if I can't make any sense of it, just because I fall off the bike once doesn't mean I have never ridden it. I just need to get back up, brush myself off, and soldier on. Just because I lose a battle doesn't mean I have never won one before. I need to refocus, pick up my sword again, and begin swinging.

5

KEY FIVE: SUPERNATURAL POWER

How do I experience the Holy Spirit's power?

On every hand, a lack of something is being felt and expressed by God's people. Their Christian experience is not what they expected it would be. Instead of expected victory, it is oft-recurring, dreaded defeat; instead of soul satisfaction, it is soul hunger ... Is this life of constant disappointment the normal life of the Bible Christian? To these sad questionings, the Divine Word answers with an emphatic "No." —John MacNeil (1854-1896)¹

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

RICHARD'S SUPERCHARGE

Years ago, I was discipling a young man by the name of Richard. He came out of a very broken and dysfunctional background but quickly proved to be one of the most intense, committed followers of Jesus I have ever worked with. In fact, he is one of the only people I have ever told, *I think you might be spending too much time in the word and prayer.*

¹ John MacNeil, *The Spirit-Filled Life* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1896), 19.

Some days he would be in prayer and Bible study for over six hours, causing his grades in college to slip and his performance at work to falter (he cut back to three to four).

At some point, Richard was turned on to the subject of this chapter—the empowering work of the Holy Spirit. He wasn't having much success in sharing the gospel with others. No one was getting saved, so I told him God had a solution. I showed him some relevant Scriptures, and I also encouraged him to read books on the Holy Spirit written by Christians from days gone by. This study led him to the following conclusion—he was not ministering in the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, *You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you (Acts 1:8)*, and Richard knew he needed it.

Richard devoted an entire hour every day just to pray for this blessing, and to make a long story short, he got it. He called me up one day, sounding a little dazed and confused. *Something strange happened to me*, he said. *I was praying, and all of a sudden, this overwhelming sense of joy came over me ... I can't really describe it, but it was awesome. Then I started saying this Bible verse over and over again. What happened to me?*

I asked him, *What Bible verse was it that you were repeating?* With great consternation in his voice he said, *You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you ... You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you ... You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.* I just laughed and said something like, *You do the math, Richard. It looks like God answered your prayer.*

Richard's own testimony is that his success in evangelism took a marked upswing from that day. People were now coming to Jesus when he shared the gospel. The

message of the gospel didn't change, but the effect it had on those who heard certainly did. That was almost ten years ago. He is happily serving the Lord today and regularly recommending that Christians take another look at their Bibles and listen to what the old schoolers had to say about the empowering of the Holy Spirit.²

WHATEVER YOU WANT TO CALL IT

The old schoolers used different terminology when they talked about it—some called it “the anointing,” others “the empowering,” still others preferred terms like “the fullness” or “the second blessing.” Whatever term they chose, the basic idea was the same—*there is something more that needs to happen to every believer AFTER salvation if they ever hope to be effective for God.* Whatever you want to call it—fullness, Holy Spirit baptism, anointing, enduement, etc.—it is a supernatural shot of power that makes normal believers like you and me an awesome force for God. (For a great introduction to this subject, see the book *They Found the Secret* by former Wheaton College President V. Raymond Edman [1900-1967].³)

Many very earnest Christians today don't seem all that concerned that they don't have any power in their game. They have embraced a deficient, twenty-first-century version of Bible-believing Christianity. They think it is

² Update on Richard: Since the first edition of this book, he completed a degree in Christian Leadership, became a founding elder of our church (The Refuge Fellowship), and landed his dream job in law enforcement. He also married a wonderful, godly young lady, and recently had his first son.

³ V. Raymond Edman, *They Found the Secret* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960).

normal to work hard for the Lord without ever seeing anything supernatural. They labor and toil, but don't expect much to happen when they share the gospel, teach, serve, or pray. This "no-results Christianity" is propagated in many of our churches today through little slogans and jingles, like *God has called us to faithfulness, not fruitfulness*.

Not so very long ago, fruitlessness—*working hard with little to show for it*—was seen as a problem to be solved, a malady that called for a cure. The greatest Christians in history, like D.L. Moody, Amy Carmichael, Charles Spurgeon, Charles Finney, John Hyde, Jonathan Goforth, A.T. Pierson, Andrew Murray, etc., all believed that if a person doesn't have power in their game, they should press in until they get it.

When Christ commissioned his apostles to go and preach, he told them to abide at Jerusalem till they were endued with power from on high. This power, as everyone knows, was the baptism of the Holy Ghost poured out upon them on the day of Pentecost. This was an indispensable qualification for success in their ministry ... so that their words were made sharp in the hearts of God's enemies, quick and powerful, like a two-edged sword. This is an indispensable qualification of a successful ministry.
—Charles Finney (1792-1875)⁴

Contrary to what so many Christians think today, the old schoolers believed that Christianity was not a one-shot deal—Christians do not get everything they need on the day they are born again. THERE IS MORE!! They believed that absolutely every true Christian needs to understand that they

⁴ Charles Finney, *Memoirs of Charles G. Finney* (New York: A.S. Barnes & Company, 1876), 55.

can be empowered by the Holy Spirit, *clothed with power from on high* (Luke 24:49).

It seems clear from the Scriptures that it is still the duty and privilege of believers to receive the Holy Spirit by a conscious, definite act of appropriating faith, just as they received Jesus Christ. —A.J. Gordon (1836-1895)⁵

Unfortunately, the idea of an empowering work of the Holy Spirit after salvation has been totally lost in many circles. The view that has won the day—the one-stage, one-shot version of Christianity—is now taught in evangelical churches as if no one ever believed otherwise. The testimonies of people like A.J. Gordon, D.L. Moody, and A.W. Tozer have not only been kept from the average Christian in the pews, even pastors and college professors today are largely unaware of what was taught about the Holy Spirit in previous generations. Anyone interested can do the research—the greatest names in the tradition all promoted the idea that *there is more*.

The transition away from a “second work” (or whatever you want to call it) began near the end of the 1800s. D.L. Moody complained of this trend as he saw evangelical teachers promoting the alternative, one-shot version of Christianity. Moody knew that it would lead to powerlessness in the church and would stymie God’s cause on earth.

Oh, why will they split hairs? Why don’t they see that this is just the one thing that they themselves need? They are good teachers, they are wonderful teachers, and I am so

⁵ Adoniram Judson Gordon, *The Ministry of the Spirit* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1895), 84.

*glad to have them here; but why will they not see that the baptism with the Holy Ghost is just the one touch that they themselves need?*⁶

Is it a coincidence that as the idea of a truly supernatural empowering of the Holy Spirit disappeared from God's church, so did the sweeping power our forebears knew? Read their biographies and see how the same power that came like a flood at Pentecost visited Christians in the 1700s, 1800s, and early 1900s. *And when they had prayed, the place where they were gathered was shaken (Acts 4:31).*

HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

As a hungry young Christian, I became obsessed with the following question. *Among the awesome old schoolers, which ones believed in some sort of additional work of the Holy Spirit, a second work after salvation?* As I examined the historical evidence, the real question became, *What old schooler didn't believe in some sort of post-conversion experience of the Holy Spirit?* I found that almost everybody who was anybody in that awesome era between 1700 and 1910 believed some version of this.

This idea of an infusion of divine power may sound strange to many twenty-first-century ears, but this wasn't some fringe doctrine taught by a few eccentric "odd ducks." These were some of the most powerful men and women who ever walked the earth. They founded many of our great denominations, ministries, colleges, and seminaries.

I know from experience that this may be the one point in this book where I will get the most pushback from pastors

⁶ R.A. Torrey, *Why God Used D.L. Moody* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1923), 56.

and theologians today. So before looking to the biblical evidence, I will get a little more backing from the historical big guns. I will quote some of the greatest, most powerful Christians to walk the earth since the days of the apostles. I will even dip into the twentieth century and appeal to some more recognizable names, like A.W. Tozer, and Martin Lloyd-Jones (perhaps the greatest preacher of his day).⁷ The point is simply this—I THINK WE ARE MISSING SOMETHING MASSIVE HERE! Next-gen, please examine the evidence for yourself!

Moody and More—Today D.L. Moody is primarily remembered as the founder of the historic Moody Bible Institute, but he was one of the most influential Christians of all time. If you break down the numbers, he averaged approximately 70 converts every single day over the course of his 40 years of ministry. Sound impossible? It was. It was supernatural, and he pointed to his post-conversion empowering with the Holy Spirit as the explanation. He said, *I would not go back to where I was before that blessed experience if you were to give me the whole world.*⁸ Now we will turn to some other major kingdom players. Some of these names may not be well known today, but these saints turned the world upside down.

R.A. Torrey (1856-1928)—Moody's friend and protégé Torrey was a noted theologian and respected leader of the evangelical movement. Author of dozens of classics, the following is a quote from *The Baptism with the Holy Spirit*.

⁷ See Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Joy Unspeakable: Power and Renewal in the Holy Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1985).

⁸ William R. Moody, *The Life of D.L. Moody* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1900), 149.

It is clear then that one may be a believer, maybe a regenerate man, and yet not have the baptism with the Holy Spirit. In other words, the baptism with the Holy Spirit is something distinct from and beyond His regenerating work. ... If a man has experienced the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, he is a saved man, but he is not fitted for service until, in addition to this, he has received the baptism with the Holy Spirit.⁹

Andrew Murray (1828-1917)—A South African Dutch Reformed Pastor, Murray was a world-renowned Christian leader and remains one of the most influential devotional writers of all time. His works, like *Humility* and *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, remain in wide circulation. He states the following in his book *The Full Blessing of Pentecost*:

(I)t is my desire to bring to the children of God the message that there is a twofold Christian life. The one is that in which we experience something of the operations of the Holy Spirit ... but we do not yet receive Him as the Pentecostal Spirit, as the personal indwelling Guest. ... On the other hand, there is a more abundant life in which the indwelling just referred to is known, and the full joy and power of redemption are facts of personal experience.¹⁰

Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892)—Spurgeon was the most influential pastor in the English-speaking world in his day and is one of the greatest preachers of all time. Called the “Prince of Preachers,” Spurgeon pastored the world-famous

⁹ R. A. Torrey, *The Baptism with the Holy Spirit* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1895), 18.

¹⁰ Andrew Murray, *The Full Blessing of Pentecost: The one thing needful* (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1908), 8-9.

Metropolitan Tabernacle in London for 38 years. In a sermon titled, *The Indwelling and Outflowing of the Holy Spirit*, he says,

You see, there is a distinct promise to the children of God that their heavenly Father will give them the Holy Spirit if they ask for His power, and that promise is made to be exceedingly strong by the instances joined to it. But He says, "How much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?" ... He has herein bound Himself by no ordinary pledge. He has used a simile which would bring dishonor on His own name, and that of the very grossest kind, if He did not give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him. Oh, then, let us ask Him at once, with all of our hearts ... especially those of you that are the children of God—to you is this promise especially made. Ask God to make you all that the Spirit of God can make you, not only a satisfied believer who has drunk for himself but a useful believer who overflows the neighborhood with blessing.¹¹

Charles Finney (1792-1875)—Powerfully used of God in The Second Great Awakening, it is estimated that he led hundreds of thousands of souls to Christ. Historian Mark Noll says, “Finney should be ranked with Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, and Andrew Carnegie ... as one of the most important public figures in nineteenth-century America.”¹² He is best known today for his classic titled *Lectures on Revival*, and in this work Finney speaks

¹¹ Delivered on May 20, 1882, at The Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington.

¹² Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 176.

repeatedly of the empowering of the Holy Spirit. He sees it as the indispensable prerequisite for effective ministry.

Here we are bound to believe that we shall receive it when we pray for it. You have no right to put an if and say, "Lord, if it be Thy will, give us Thy Holy Spirit." This is to insult God. To put an if into God's promise, where God has put none, is tantamount to charging God with being insincere."¹³

Oswald Chambers (1874-1917)—Chambers' book *My Utmost for His Highest* is without question one of the most influential books in evangelicalism over the last 100 years. When he experienced the empowering of the Holy Spirit, the effect on his ministry was so immediate that it shook him to the core. He believed the following:

*When a man experiences salvation, the note of testimony is what Jesus has done for him; when he is baptized with the Holy Ghost, he becomes a witness, which means much more than a testifier to blessing received. ... The baptism of the Holy Ghost is Jesus putting the final seal on His work in you, His seal on your regenerated and entirely sanctified soul, and is your inauguration into service for Him.*¹⁴

A.T. Pierson (1837-1911)—Pierson was one of the primary promoters of the Student Volunteer Movement and a key leader of the influential Keswick Convention. It is also worth noting that he was unanimously elected to take the pulpit of the Metropolitan Tabernacle when the great Charles

¹³ Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (New York: Leavitt, Lord & Co., 1835), 73.

¹⁴ Oswald Chambers, *He Shall Glorify Me* (London: Simpkin, Marshall & Co., 1941).

Spurgeon's health was failing. Author of many influential books, Pierson clearly argues for a "double aspect" to the Holy Spirit's work in a believer's life: First,

... opening of the heart ... to His blessed incoming, and then giving up to His possession and power, service, and control the whole being He indwells."¹⁵

Adoniram Judson Gordon (1836-1895)—Baptist Minister and world-renowned evangelical leader, best known today as the founder of Gordon College and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Gordon argues for an empowering work of the Holy Spirit after salvation and holds that this must be taken by a distinct act of faith:

*The baptism in the Holy Ghost was given once for all on the day of Pentecost ... It does not follow therefore that every believer has received this baptism ... It seems clear from Scripture that it is still the duty and privilege of believers to receive the Holy Spirit by an act of appropriating faith.*¹⁶

*And since the only avenue through which God can come in is faith, it seems clear that we must receive Him by faith, if at all. Stephen was a man full of faith and the Holy Ghost. Full of the Holy Ghost because he was full of faith.*¹⁷

A.B. Simpson (1843-1919)—Founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination and what is today

¹⁵ A.T. Pierson, *The Acts of the Holy Spirit* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1895), 100.

¹⁶ A. J. Gordon, *The Ministry of The Spirit* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1895), 67-68.

¹⁷ A.J. Gordon, "The Holy Spirit," In *Watchword and Truth*, vol. 20 no. 6 (June 1898), 165.

Nyack College. Simpson authored dozens of books and was influential in the early development of the Pentecostal movement and the theology of denominations like The Assemblies of God and Church of The Foursquare Gospel. In a sermon titled “The Baptism of the Holy Spirit,” he stated,

The sinner does not come first to the Holy Spirit, but to Christ. Our first business is to receive Jesus and then to receive the Holy Ghost.

A.W. Tozer (1897-1963)—Tozer represents a slightly later era, but in some respects was among the last of a dying breed—an influential evangelical leader who pushed Christians to go deeper with the Holy Spirit. Known as a twentieth-century prophet to the evangelical church, Tozer was a pastor with the Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination for over four decades and remains one of the most respected devotional writers of the last century. The following is taken from his book titled *The Counselor*:

I can be dogmatic about this on the basis of deep study. No one was ever filled with the Holy Spirit who didn't know that he had been so filled! Furthermore, none of the persons in the Bible and none that I can find in Church history or biography was ever filled with the Holy Spirit who didn't know when he was filled.¹⁸

Martin Lloyd-Jones (1899-1980)—Pastor of the Westminster Chapel and considered by many to be one of the greatest preachers in church history. He wrote a book on his understanding of the second work of the Holy Spirit

¹⁸ A.W. Tozer, *The Counselor*, revised ed. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1993), 67.

called *Joy Unspeakable* (which had a profound impact on my life when I was a young Christian). The following is from a sermon titled “Diagnosing the Need.”

(Y)ou must be confident that God has this power as much today as He did one hundred years ago and two hundred years ago. And so you must begin to seek the power, you must begin to pray for the power, you must begin to plead and yearn for the power.¹⁹

TIME WILL FAIL ME

Above, we touched on just a handful of the most powerful people in Christian history, but if we dig further into the annals and name missionaries, evangelists, pastors, revivalists, and authors, this chapter could go into the hundreds of pages. Legendary missionaries like John Hyde, Jonathan Goforth, and Amy Carmichael, and powerful revivalists like Evan Roberts and Duncan Campbell all argued for the necessity of a deeper work of the Holy Spirit—a baptism, an anointing, an infilling. The evidence is simply overwhelming.

It is a fact that the greatest, most powerful saints who ever walked the planet believed that Christians should seek a deeper work of the Holy Spirit after salvation. They do tend to differ on some of the details, but they agree on this—**THERE IS MORE, AND YOU CAN HAVE IT!** But all this historical evidence, as compelling as it may be, is not the main concern for any good Bible-believing Christian. The real question is this—*Is this idea supported by Scripture?* And the answer is, *Absolutely.*

¹⁹ Martin Lloyd-Jones, from his sermon “Diagnosing the Need.” You can listen to this sermon at www.mljtrust.org.

BIBLICAL EVIDENCE

The real reason this whole chapter sounds so strange to many twenty-first-century Christians has to do with the way we have been trained to read our Bibles. When enough people in authority say the same thing over and over and over again, their opinion becomes the norm. And an accepted norm or belief will control how any text (even the Bible) is read and interpreted. The fact is that we often have a belief set in stone in our minds before we really study it out for ourselves.

What I am talking about is something that scholars call a *construal*—it’s like a lens that determines beforehand what we can or cannot see in a text. The hard truth is that when it comes to the Holy Spirit and many other issues (like prayer, the demonic, and even the character of God), our reading of the Bible is often predetermined. As one of my seminary professors once sarcastically quipped,

*Wonderful things in the Bible I see,
Most of them brought there by you and by me.*

I know this is a troubling idea, but it happens all the time. It takes a real work of God to break us free from our construals once we have developed them. Pretend you are picking up the Bible for the first time and look again at the biblical text with fresh eyes. Then it is easy to see why people like Moody, Torrey, and Tozer believed as they did. The notion that the Holy Spirit gives believers a supercharge, a shot of spiritual power after salvation, is really a quite natural reading of the biblical text.

In the book of Luke, for instance, Jesus tells His disciples to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit comes and gives them power. *Remain in the city until you are clothed with*

power from on high (Luke 24:49). This is exactly what we find them doing in the early chapters of *Acts*—120 of them, gathered together, waiting ... praying, and waiting. What are they waiting for? Were they waiting for *salvation*? No. Were they waiting on some *new revelation*? No. Just what were they waiting for? There is only one answer given by the Bible itself, straight from the mouth of Jesus—**POWER**.

Wait in Jerusalem until you are clothed with power from on high.

The Bible doesn't say this just once. Before Jesus's ascension, He told them again that the Holy Spirit was going to give them **POWER!** Power for what? Very specifically, power to speak God's message.

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses. (Acts 1:8)

When the Holy Spirit finally does show up, what happens? One thing is perfectly clear—Jesus's followers receive **POWER**. This little army gets a supercharge from heaven, and from that moment they proceed to turn the world on its head. (This also lines up with the pattern in Jesus's life. He did no miracles until the Holy Spirit came upon Him after His baptism.)

Before receiving this supercharge, the apostles already knew and believed the gospel message. But Jesus tells them that they are not yet ready to give it out to the world. Only when the Spirit comes upon them in power could they proclaim the message effectively. Once the Spirit does come *like a mighty rushing wind*, thousands pour into the kingdom (read all about it in *Acts 2*). Suddenly they have a touch from God that yields amazing results.

The apostle Peter then explains to the gathering crowds what is happening. He refers to the Old Testament book of *Joel* and explains that God is fulfilling an ancient prophecy—to raise a supercharged army of prophets, filled with the Holy Spirit and proclaiming God’s word:

It will be that in the last days, God declares, I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters will prophesy, and your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams. Even on my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out My Spirit; and they will prophesy. (Acts 2:17-18)

From this point on, whenever anyone gets saved in the book of *Acts*, the Christian leaders are quick to make sure that they receive their own personal supercharge.

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. (Acts 8:14-15)

If we stick to what the Bible says, we can be absolutely certain that the apostles received power to proclaim the gospel message on the day of Pentecost. Theologians can read all sorts of other things into the passage if they want to, but the text itself emphasizes power—prophetic power. Then wherever they went, they passed this power on to anyone and everyone who received the message of salvation. This is why it makes perfect sense that so many of the greats of our tradition, the old schoolers, emphasized this idea.

Does this mean that a believer who has not been empowered by the Holy Spirit does not have the Holy Spirit at all? No! Every believer has the Holy Spirit in certain respects—*He who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with*

Him (1 Corinthians 6:17). At the moment of salvation, we were born of the Spirit. It was the Spirit who was convincing us, cleansing us, changing us, and then taking up permanent residence inside of us.

He saved us ... by the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit. (Titus 3:5)

Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God? (1 Corinthians 6:19)

New believers usually have no clue that there even *is* a Holy Spirit, and they certainly don't know that they can receive a shot of supernatural power from Him!

All the biblical evidence argues that everyone who is born again has the Holy Spirit indwelling them. Still, they need another operation of the Holy Spirit to take place within them—His fullness/His empowering. They have not laid hold of the fact that the Holy Spirit can and will definitely work supernaturally in and through them if they let Him. So once again, let's be very clear on this—everyone who is born again has the Holy Spirit in one sense (even though they may be ignorant of it), but they have not yet laid hold of His power to proclaim (or should we say, His power has not yet laid hold of *them*).

Paul prays that believers would become aware of the supernatural power available to them, the power that raised Jesus from the dead. In a previous chapter, we mentioned the implications of this truth for living a life pleasing to God, but it also applies to the power God gives us to serve Him.

I pray that the eyes of your heart would be enlightened so that you would know ... the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who have faith, according to the working

of His mighty strength which He demonstrated in Christ when He raised Him up from the dead. (Eph. 1:18-20)

If we do not know that this power is available, we will not ask for it, and if we do not ask for it, we will not have it. *You do not have because you do not ask (James 4:4).*

SO HOW DO I GET IT—THE EMPOWERING?

Any Christian who is convinced that the empowering of the Holy Spirit is something they need will inevitably ask—*How do I lay hold of this for myself?* If you have read all the previous chapters of this book, you should be able to figure this out for yourself. We receive the empowering of the Holy Spirit the same way we lay hold of any of God’s blessings. But before getting any more specific, we should clear one thing up—the Holy Spirit is not an “it.”

It’s okay to use the word “it” to refer to the blessing of empowering, but we cannot use the word “it” to refer to the One who *is* the blessing. The Holy Spirit is not an “it.” He is the third Person of the Holy Trinity—*Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*—and He doesn’t want you to think of Him as an “it” (any more than you want to be called an “it”). Going into detail on the Trinity is beyond the scope of this chapter, but just remember this. When we are talking about receiving the blessing of empowering, we are talking about a new experience of the Holy Spirit, and we always need to be careful to refer to Him as a “He” and not an “it.” He is as much a Person as Jesus is, and we would never call Jesus an “it.”

So back to the question. How do we receive the blessing of empowering, or “Him,” the Holy Spirit, in this way? There are many good (old) books and sermons out there on

the subject. For some helpful guidance, I would recommend A.W. Tozer's sermon, "How to be Filled with the Spirit," or R.A. Torrey's little book, *Baptism with the Holy Spirit*. The essence of it is really pretty simple. Just review what we have already gone over in the previous chapters of this book:

1. In Chapter 1, we covered the subject of salvation. Are you truly born again, trusting in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus alone for your salvation? Have you embraced Jesus as Savior and yielded to Him as Lord of your life? If you have, you are then in a position to enjoy the rest of your inheritance—like power for service.
2. In Chapter 2, we talked about how important it is to become mighty in the Scriptures, that we grow up and learn to search the Bible for ourselves. Have you looked long and hard at what the Bible says about the empowering work of the Holy Spirit? Have you become convinced that the power of the Holy Spirit is something that every child of God is promised and that it will be given if you ask in faith?
3. Chapter 3 covered the importance of ridding our life of all known sin. To the best of your knowledge, are you walking in holiness, with *clean hands and a pure heart*? God has so many things He wants to give us, but if you recall, sin will short circuit these blessings. Ask yourself, *Are my hands clean? Is my heart pure?*
4. Chapter 4 was on the biblical teaching about prayer and faith. God has given us numerous promises to bless and benefit our lives. Our responsibility is to simply *believe and receive*. Just like we accepted God's gift of salvation through Jesus, we need to receive all His other blessings.

If you are truly saved, have clean hands and a pure heart, take the promises of God before the throne of grace and pray them until you know the blessing is yours.

If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him? (Luke 11:13)

WRAPPING THINGS UP

We will close this chapter with one final historical account of a great old schooler we already mentioned—Oswald Chambers (1874-1917). Anyone who has been around the block in “born-again” Christianity knows his book, *My Utmost for His Highest*,²⁰ one of the most beloved devotionals of all time.

Chambers was pretty frustrated and unfruitful until he claimed the power of the Holy Spirit by faith (he liked to use the term *baptism of the Holy Spirit*). In a Christian meeting he was attending, he stood up in utter frustration and basically said, *Christianity is a sham, or I am missing something*. He actually said, *Either Christianity is a downright fraud, or I have not got hold of the right end of the stick*. Right then and there, he claimed the gift of the Holy Spirit by faith. The results were so dramatic that it scared him. He received POWER!

Then I was asked to speak at a meeting, and forty souls came out to the front. Did I praise God? No, I was terrified and left them to the workers, and went to Mr. Macgregor and told him what had happened, and he said: “Don’t you remember claiming the Holy Spirit as a gift

²⁰ Oswald Chamber, *My Utmost for His Highest* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1935).

on the word of Jesus, and that He said, 'Ye shall receive power' ... ? This is the power from on high."²¹

Now the only question is, have you received this gift of God? How will you know if you have? There is only one clear biblical answer—

You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. (Acts 1:8)

POSTSCRIPT: PENTECOSTALISM²²

There was one group in the twentieth century that held on to the idea of a definite empowering work of the Holy Spirit after salvation—the *Pentecostals*. Knowing just a little bit about this movement goes a long way towards understanding why the doctrine of a second work of the Holy Spirit slowly disappeared from most Bible-believing churches after 1906.

Pentecostalism exploded onto the world scene in 1906 and has hundreds of millions of adherents today. The first generation of Pentecostalism gave rise to denominations like The Assemblies of God and The Foursquare Church.

Many great Christians (referred to in this book), like Oswald Chambers, A.T. Pierson, and A.B. Simpson, would

²¹ David McCasland, *Oswald Chambers, Abandoned to God: The Life Story of the Author of My Utmost for His Highest* (Nashville, TN: Discovery House, 1993), 83.

²² For a very helpful introduction to the rise of Pentecostalism, see Edith Blumhofer, *The Assemblies of God, Pentecostalism, and American Culture* (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

not fully support Pentecostalism for one primary reason—its extreme emphasis on *glossolalia* (or tongues). Classic Pentecostal doctrine teaches that the second work of the Holy Spirit is *always* accompanied by the supernatural ability to speak in an unlearned language—tongues. Non-Pentecostal leaders like Chambers, Pierson, and others had no problem with the idea of a second work, but would not agree that tongues *always* accompanied it. Largely because of this disagreement over tongues, Pentecostalism broke from other born-again Christian groups and became its own entity.

Over time, the gap between Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals grew because of the tongues issue (and for other reasons beyond the scope of our discussions, like scandal and doctrinal error). The Pentecostals continued to teach a second work—a *baptism of the Holy Spirit*—always evidenced by tongues. Non-Pentecostals moved further and further away from anything that smacked of Pentecostalism—including the idea of an empowering after salvation.

Eventually, the “one-shot” version of Christianity (“You get everything at salvation”) came to dominate in most non-Pentecostal churches. This remains the situation today. But make no mistake about it. There was a time when virtually all the great born-again leaders in the world believed in an empowering work of the Holy Spirit after salvation. The sad fact that few Christians today seem to be willing to face is this—when this doctrine disappeared from the non-Pentecostal churches, so did the sweeping power of God.

6

KEY SIX: SPIRITUAL WARFARE

Can Satan torment me if I am a Christian?

Do not therefore be at all surprised if Satan rages against you, nor marvel if you yourself should seem to be given into his power, but rather rejoice in this, that his great wrath is the sign of the shortness of his time. He wages war with us all the more cruelly because he knows that he will ultimately be defeated. —C.H. Spurgeon (1834-92)¹

“Why couldn’t we cast it out?” ... “Because you have so little faith.” (Matthew 17:19-20)

SOPHIA AND SATAN

When I first met Sophia, she had just been committed to a mental hospital and was on suicide watch. Her life had utterly disintegrated, and no one could figure out why. In a matter of days, she had gone from a model Christian to an out-of-control, suicidal wreck. Prior to her collapse, she had been a leader in her college ministry and was planning to devote her life to missions. But now she was saying things

¹ From the sermon, “Satan in a Rage,” preached by Charles Spurgeon on November 2, 1879, at The Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington.

like, *I belong to Satan*, and *I don't have a soul*. To me, the problem was obvious—*Sophia had somehow opened up a door to demonic influence*.

Although Sophia lived in another city, as soon as I heard about her I began praying that God would allow me to get into the mix. I enjoy God calling me into situations like this—not because it's fun to deal with the demonic, but because I expect God to win. Her parents were desperate, so they invited me to talk with her. A friend and I made the two-hour drive to visit her in the mental hospital.

On our initial visit, we talked with Sophia for about an hour. She seemed to understand everything that was being said, and I thought we had broken through. I really thought she was on her way to freedom, but when I called to check up on her, it was like a punch in the gut. Almost as soon as we drove away, she slipped back into darkness and despair. I was baffled.

We agreed to get together the next week. It seemed like we made great progress, but once again, almost as soon as I drove away, she was in chaos. (All her therapy and medication wasn't helping anything, either.) This cycle went on for two months. Again and again, it seemed like we had a breakthrough only to find her back on the edge of the cliff. While awake, she was tormented and terrorized and wanted to kill herself, and sleep brought her no relief. She told us that she dreamed about crawling on hands and knees through the flames of hell.

Her behavior only deteriorated over time, and this former “model Christian” was cursing, lying, and bingeing whenever she had the chance. When she went home for visits, her family never knew what sort of crazy stunt she might pull. She might steal a bottle of alcohol and down the

whole thing “just because.” She might jump in a car and start driving out of state. She might steal her mother’s phone and pretend to be her in text conversations. She was out of control and totally unpredictable.

Her case was particularly difficult. It took some time to figure out just what Satan was up to, but Sophia finally broke free—totally, completely free. We will explain how in the coming pages.² Her case was actually pretty textbook—the way Satan gets control in the vast majority of people. The Word of God lays out how all this works. In this chapter, we will discuss the process and focus on how to get free and stay free. You see, Satan and his minions have laws and rules they are confined to, and if we learn those laws and rules, we can pretty much beat him down every time. For anyone interested, it’s all in the Bible.

*Be excellent in what is good and innocent of evil, and the God of peace will soon crush Satan underneath your feet.
(Romans 16:19-20)*

STOP THE INSANITY!

Nothing advances Satan's work with more skillful and readier hands than to be ignorant of Satan and his ways. To escape his snare, we must not only have a strong faith in the fact that Satan is but also must have a most intimate

² Since this book was originally written, Sophia moved to our town to get involved in the discipleship program, and was a founding member of our church, The Refuge Fellowship. She married Brandon (from Chapter 2), and recently became the mother of an adorable little boy. For her testimony, go to <https://youtu.be/Q5vcNxKcP7U> .

*knowledge of him and of his plans and many-sided ways.—E.M. Bounds (1835-1913)*³

It is impossible to understand the Bible rightly without believing in the existence of Satan and his army of demons—evil spiritual beings with intelligence and will. Removing them from the biblical narrative is like attempting to understand World War II without the Nazis in the storyline. Jesus’s entire ministry is summed up by the apostle John as a mission to deliver the human race from Satan’s power. *The Son of Man appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8).*

Make a note of this—there are no Bible-believing Christians in history of any eternal significance who did not take the existence of these beings seriously.

*We know that Satan and all his angels are continually warring against us and watching over every child of man. They are ever watching to see whose outward or inward circumstances, whose prosperity or adversity, whose health or sickness, whose friends or enemies, whose youth or age, whose knowledge or ignorance, whose blindness or idleness, whose joy or sorrow, may lay them open to temptation. —John Wesley (1703-91)*⁴

The devil ... being driven on to his own inexpressible torment by the fury of sin, malice, revenge, and pride, and is so entirely under the government of malice that although he never attempted anything against God but he

³ E.M. Bounds, *Satan, His Personality, Power, and Overthrow* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1923), 116.

⁴ John Wesley, from the sermon “Of Evil Angels,” found in Wesley’s collected works, *Sermons on Several Occasions*.

*was disappointed. Yet, he cannot bear to be quiet and refrain from exercising himself with all his might and subtlety against the increase of holiness. —Jonathan Edwards (1703-58)*⁵

The Bible indicates that God created billions of holy angels, *thousands upon thousands ... and myriads upon myriads (Daniel 7:10)*. The consensus among theologians and Bible scholars is that the demons were once part of this host of holy angels in the service of God. Demons are the one-third who chose to rebel under the leadership of Satan. They were subsequently cast out of heaven and now are obsessed with tormenting and torturing human beings.

And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him ... Woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has come down to you, and he has great wrath, knowing that his time is short. (Revelation 12:9-12)

Sadly, in our day there is an ocean of confused thinking on the subject of the demonic. Some Christians never think about it at all, as if these innumerable hosts of hell were all shipped off to some other planet after Jesus's resurrection. Others go nutty over the subject as if Satan and his demons are responsible for virtually everything—my flat tire, my headache, my bad test grade. But, even those who really want to maintain biblical balance often end up in confusion. Discussions among Christians can quickly get off trajectory, simply because of the words that are used. Below we will try to keep it all simple, clear, and biblically accurate.

⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (Southampton: The Camelot Press Ltd., 1834), 612.

THE WORDS WE USE

Some of the most widely believed errors about the demonic stem from the term *possessed* (as in *demon possessed*). The fact is that the word “possessed” is *not* in the original Greek at all, and so we should remove it from the discussion completely. This term “possessed” comes from early English translations of the Bible (like the King James Version). Using the word almost ensures that truth and clarity will go off the rails because the word “possessed” carries a whole bunch of baggage that leads people to false premises and false conclusions.

Countless misguided sermons have centered on a statement that goes something like this: *Christians cannot be demon possessed because they are possessed by Jesus (or the Holy Spirit)*. This naïve little cliché then leads the whole church to smugly conclude that they are bulletproof, impervious to demonic influence ... which is simply not true. Just for starters, if it were really this simple and Christians were bulletproof, why would the biblical authors tell Christians things like the following:

Be of sober spirit, be on the alert, your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. (1 Peter 5:8)

Don’t be deceived. Born-again people like you and I can be utterly overwhelmed and even destroyed by demonic powers—like what was happening to Sophia. Countless earnest Christians have arrived at a wrong conclusion in their understanding of the demonic because they never framed the discussion properly. If we seek biblical wisdom, we can learn how Satan and his cohorts work. We can also learn how to crush them under our feet regularly.

... In order that no advantage be taken of us by Satan because we are not ignorant of his schemes. (2 Corinthians 2:11)

GET RID OF THE WORD “POSSESSED”

So, we first need to deal with this term *possessed*. Again, the fact is that it needs to be abandoned altogether because it is not in the original Greek of the New Testament. We should replace it with a word like *demonized*. Whenever we use the term *possessed*, it immediately brings to mind the idea of ownership—as in, *The devil or a demon owns that person*. THIS IS NOT THE POINT THE BIBLE IS MAKING. When the Bible talks about the demonic working in people, it is not primarily interested in *ownership*. It is talking about how people are being *afflicted*—mentally, morally, or physically.

To convey the idea of being severely afflicted by a demon, the New Testament authors sometimes use a very interesting term—they take the noun “demon” (*daimōn*) and transform it into a verb (*daimonizomai*). In the older English translations like the King James Version, they would insert the word *possessed* wherever this Greek word appeared. A much less confusing English translation that better reflects what the Bible is saying is *afflicted by a demon*. To make the same point, we can put the suffix *-ized* on the end of the word *demon*, as we do with so many other English words. This gives us the much more accurate word *demonized*.

How would the Bible then be read in English? The following is an example:

And when He (Jesus) came to the other side into the country of the Gadarenes, two men who were demonized met Him. (Matthew 8:28)

Instead of:

And when He (Jesus) came to the other side into the country of the Gadarenes, two men who were demon-possessed met Him.

The first translation eliminates all the unnecessary confusion about ownership (and more accurately reflects the original Greek). When a person is *terrorized*, they are not owned by a terrorist, and when they are *brutalized*, they are not owned by a brute. Along the same lines, when someone is *demonized*, it says nothing about ownership. Why is this so important? Because if we are muddled in our thinking, Satan can take advantage of us ... even destroy us.

Here are the facts. In this lifetime, as long as we inhabit these bodies, demons will always be trying to afflict and destroy us. In a sense, they don't really care what the ultimate state of our soul is. Saved or lost, they seek to gain access and control, and that is what we will focus on here.

As serious Christians, we really need to get our heads on straight about all this—the biblical discussion is primarily about how demons afflict people.⁶ If we want to be technical about things, we could say that everyone who is not born again “belongs” to Satan, and everyone who is born again cannot “belong” to Satan. The former group (the lost) belongs to Satan because he still has a legal claim to their souls. The latter group (the saved) do not belong to Satan

⁶ We can't talk in great detail about all the intricacies of demonic affliction. Other books have done this very well—like just about anything on the subject by Neil T. Anderson. See Neil T. Anderson, *The Bondage Breaker* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1990), and *Victory Over the Darkness: Realizing the Power of Your Identity in Christ* (Ventura, California: Regal, 1990).

because the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus has broken Satan's ultimate claim on them. BUT AGAIN, THIS IS COMPLETELY IRRELEVANT TO THE DISCUSSION HERE. We are not talking about Satan's ultimate claim on a person's soul, we are talking about how demons afflict people here on earth.

Now we can examine Satan's main strategy for afflicting people. He works this on pretty much anyone—me, you, the saved, or the unsaved. Satan and his demons are rather indiscriminating; they will just as readily afflict a born-again missionary or pastor as an avowed atheist or Satanist ... if the conditions are right. They are driven by lust to destroy. If they can't have your soul because you are saved, they can still make your life on earth a living hell.

LIKE PARASITES

When the Bible talks about spiritual things, it often resorts to metaphors. A helpful way to think about how a demon operates is by comparing it to a parasite, like a leech or a tick. Demons seem to be always trying to attach themselves to a host, which will give them some sort of temporary relief ... as if they feed off of us in a way (*Yuck!*). Jesus said that when evil spirits are not afflicting someone, it's as if they stumble around in a desert. *When an unclean spirit goes out of a person, it goes through waterless places seeking rest (Matthew 12:43).*

All evidence indicates that in this desperate state, demons will attach themselves to a child of God (a saved person) just as readily as they will attach themselves to a lost person—again, if the conditions are right. So here is the big question: *What conditions allow a demon to afflict a person?* Except for very, very rare exceptions, it is when you and I

choose to sin boldly and defiantly that demons have a right to torment and afflict us.⁷

When you or I choose to do something in clear violation of God’s will—lie, cheat, steal, hate, commit sexual immorality—we are basically inviting one of these little suckers to latch onto us. This is why the apostle warns Christians not to *give a place to the devil (Ephesians 4:27)*. Jesus once told His disciples that Satan would be paying them a visit, but *he has nothing in Me (John 14:30)*. Why could He say this? Because He had not committed any sin. Why could Satan or his demons freely enter biblical figures like Saul, Judas, Peter, and Ananias? SIN!

Theologians and Bible scholars can debate exactly where these demons are when they are afflicting a person—are they in a person’s mind, soul, or fallen flesh? Quite frankly, I don’t really care where they are—I don’t want them in me, on me, or around me. My only interest is overcoming them—crushing them under my feet (*Romans 16:19-20*).

The confusion regarding the “location” of demons probably arises from the fact that the Bible often uses language from our physical world to help us wrap our little brains around this spiritual reality. Sometimes people are likened to houses that demons can live in (*Matthew 12:44*). Sometimes they are compared to the geography demons are trying to claim (*Ephesians 4:27*). Sometimes people are

⁷ There do seem to be rare instances when God allows demonic powers to afflict a person when there is not a sin issue involved. Arguably, this is what is happening in the Old Testament book of *Job*, and in the New Testament book of *2 Corinthians*, when an angel from Satan is allowed to afflict Paul (ch. 12). But this situation is a very rare exception, not the rule, and it serves some higher purpose of God. The rule is, obedient Christians expect to regularly crush Satan under their feet.

depicted like some poor little gazelle that demons want to eat for lunch (*1 Peter 5:8*). Regardless of the metaphor, the bottom line is this—demons can influence us in profound, life-altering ways, and even destroy us.

Our main concern should be how to beat them, not get into technical arguments about their official “10-20.” (Sophia wasn’t interested in a technical discussion about where the demons were. All she knew was that they were destroying her, and she needed freedom.) What we really need to do as Christians is focus on the *how*, *when*, and *why* of demonic affliction and learn how we can get them off of us and keep them off of us.

All this talk about being *demonized* can be very unsettling for the uninitiated, but dodging the issue won’t help anything. Satan and his cohorts won’t give you a pass just because you don’t want to play their game. A much better strategy is to study what the Bible says about Satan and his demons and learn to beat them, because until Jesus comes back they largely control the planet we live on.

The whole world lies in the power of the evil one. (1 John 5:19)

And the devil said ... “I will give you all this domain and its glory; for it has been given over to me and I give it to whomever I please.” (Luke 4:6)

The Bible frames our whole struggle here on earth as a battle against these invisible spiritual forces. Like it or not, as long as you and I are living in Satan’s territory (earth), we can be afflicted and even destroyed. So it is imperative that we learn how to fight.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. Put on the complete armor of God so that you can stand

firm against the schemes of the devil. Because our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the dark forces of this world, against the wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:10-12)

THE ANATOMY OF DEMONIZATION

Jesus once referred to Satan as *the father of lies* (John 8:44). Why are lies so inextricably bound to Satan's identity, and his strategy? All evidence indicates that the severely demonized, like Sophia, are typically brought into their condition by first yielding to lies, and this is what leads them deeper and deeper into sin.

This strategy goes back to the dawn of human history. The earliest chapters of Genesis give us a sort of paradigm of how this works. The serpent (Satan) lies to Eve about God's will and word, and this leads her into sin. This is what first plunged the human race into darkness.

Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What have you done?" And the woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." (Genesis 3:13)

The implications and repercussions of Adam and Eve's sin were much more far-reaching than any sin we can commit—it's as if their sin put all of humanity in a prison camp run by Satan. While we are living in this prison camp, Satan still uses the same time-tested process on us. *I fear that as the serpent deceived Eve, so your minds will be led astray (2 Corinthians 11:3).*

Like a sadistic Nazi prison guard, Satan and his hosts get their thrills by tormenting, terrorizing, and destroying people. They intensify our suffering by getting us to believe

more and more lies, which leads to deeper and deeper bondage ... this is demonization.

From start to finish, we find demonized people in the biblical narrative, and we can safely assume that Satan is up to his normal *m.o.*—lies lead to sin, sin leads to demonic control. There are actually too many examples of demonization in the Bible to cite. In the Old Testament, evil spirits deceived false prophets (*2 Chronicles 18:21*), and an evil spirit terrorized King Saul (*1 Samuel 16:14*). In the New Testament, Jesus's very first sermon is interrupted by a demonized man (*Mark 1:23*). In a verse describing Jesus's ministry, the Bible summarizes it this way,

And He went into their synagogues throughout all Galilee, preaching and casting out demons. (Mark 1:39)

One of Jesus's most devoted followers, Mary Magdalene, is said to have been delivered from seven tormenting spirits (*Mark 16:9*). Church tradition holds that she was a prostitute, which would certainly explain the "sin entry point" for the demonic activity in her life. But whatever the case, we can safely assume that lies drove her deep into sin, which opened her up to demonic control. In many cases (like Mary's), we aren't given all the gruesome details—what lies they fell prey to, what sins gave the demons legal right to torment them—but there are instances where we can see more of the process at work.

Another clear example of demonization in the New Testament is seen in the case of Ananias and Sapphira. The language used in the Bible indicates a couple in deep sin who could have wreaked havoc on the early church. *Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit? (Acts 5:3).*

Another clear-cut example of demonization, which shows the normal pattern at work, would be Judas Iscariot. Before his lust for money led him to betray Jesus, the Bible tells us that he was a thief. Satan worked this area of sin in Judas's life until he could control him at will. *And Satan entered into Judas, who was called Iscariot (Luke 22:3).*

But, even “the good guys” in Scripture are not immune or bulletproof—even the apostles were attacked. All evidence indicates that Peter opened himself up to the demonic through the sin of pride (*Luke 22:24*). Satan then demanded from God the right to *sift him like wheat (Luke 22:31)*. This all happened right before Peter's moral collapse—his denial of Jesus.

SPIRITUAL WARFARE IN A NUTSHELL

Satan's overarching scheme is really not all that difficult to understand. So let's review it a few more times to really lock it in. There is one place in the Bible that outlines the whole sequence of demonization more clearly than any other. It has all the major components of Satan's strategy, and God's solution. I call it *Spiritual Warfare in a Nutshell*. Here it is:

With gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance, leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will. (2 Timothy 2:25-26)

If we work backwards, we see that someone is ***held captive to do Satan's will***, and they ***are in a snare***. In short, this person is demonized. How did they get this way? They were led into sin through some sort of lie. Lies have always

been Satan's primary tool for gaining control over humanity (this is why he is called *the father of lies*). This Scripture also clearly lays out the solution. The thing that is going to set this poor soul free is ***the knowledge of the truth*** which will ***bring them to their senses***. This is precisely why Jesus says elsewhere that *the truth will set you free* (*John 8:32*).

There is a little more to it, but that is basically it—Satan snares you and me by getting us to believe a lie. Believing some lie—*It won't hurt anyone—God can't forgive you—The Bible can't be trusted—You are worthless*—then gets us to act in a way that is contrary to God's will—*sin*. When we commit sin, Satan and his demons then have a legal right to attach like little life-sucking parasites. From that contact point, they then try to get more and more influence over us.

This strategy is how Satan and his demons are trying to work you and me day-in and day-out. This is why the book of Ephesians tells Christians not to go to bed angry. Why? *Ephesians 4:27* tells us that anger can become a contact point for the devil; the word Paul uses here (Gk. *topos*) quite literally means *territory*. Unconfessed sin basically gives Satan “squatter's rights” in you.

Once they latch on and begin sucking, they are voracious, and they invite others to join in. It always starts small—a little bitterness, a little lust—but the problem grows worse over time if not dealt with. Judas Iscariot was in the habit of snitching a little money from the company chest (*John 12:6*) before he morphed into a full-blown, out-of-control demoniac.

Obviously, everyone who falls for this diabolical scheme IS NOT immediately transformed into a stark-raving mad demoniac like Judas, but a little sin is how it all starts. The first sin can be like a beachhead, where Satan or one of his

demons can work out from and gain territory. The lie gets more and more power, and the sin gets more dominant until it is like an out-of-control monster. Most of us have been on this ride at some point in our lives—lying, depression, anxiety, eating disorders, or sexual addiction.

All the biblical evidence indicates that when we give in to a lie, it often sets us up for other lies ... and other sins. Pretty soon, we can have one, two, three, or even thousands of these little suckers on us. Jesus once asked a demon, *What is your name?* The demon responded, *My name is Legion, for we are many* (*Mark 5:9*). This should make anyone pretty uncomfortable—the idea that innumerable evil, destructive beings can attach themselves to us and destroy us. But don't worry, God has given us everything we need to win. We will get there in a minute.

At this point, all we need to focus on is the fact that God has set up His universe with laws and rules. There are physical laws and rules—time, gravity, etc.—and there are spiritual rules and laws, as well. One spiritual law that governs our universe is that Satan and his demons gain legal access to us through sin. This means they can't simply jump on you and mug you or take over your life while you sleep. You don't pick up demons like you catch a cold. As a rule, we have to invite demonic powers to torment us, and we do this through sin. This paradigm pretty much explains the biblical evidence—lies lead to sin, sin leads to demonic influence, and if not checked, sin leads to death and destruction.

Back to our passage—*2 Timothy 2:25-26*. The apostle Paul clearly lays out the fundamental problem with the demonized person—they are out of their senses, ensnared by the devil. Why? In the first place, they believe lies. This, in

turn, leads them to sin, which gives the devil the legal right to influence them—*hold them captive to do his will*. This is all confirmed by Paul, when he says the remedy for them is *to come to the knowledge of the truth and repentance*. Repentance simply indicates the change of mind and action that takes place when a person no longer believes lies. This paradigm pretty well explains all the evidence we find in the Bible, from Eve to Judas to Ananias and Sapphira. When a person believes lies, then sins, they are *held captive to do Satan's will*.

Again, contrary to popular belief, Satan cannot just jump on you or into you when you are walking down the street. In the movies, demons may mug someone because they moved into some haunted house or got lost in a graveyard, but that is just silly Hollywood. The devil and his minions have rules they have to play by, and they are pretty powerless if you understand them and don't open the door. If they can't convince you to do stupid, sinful things, they just sort of buzz around in frustration. This is precisely what we see in the life of Jesus. He wouldn't give in to Satan's lies, so Satan couldn't get any control over Him. So what did the devil do? He just skulked off into the darkness:

When the devil had finished every temptation, he left Him until an opportune time. (Luke 4:13)

Unfortunately, we don't always handle the devil's temptations with the strength and clarity Jesus had, and all of us give in to sin from time to time. It is at this point that we can be worked by the devil. Now the choice is up to us—will we allow Satan and sin to run their course, or do we short circuit the ride to destruction? *When sin has run its course, it leads to death (James 1:15)*. When Judas got on

this ride, he failed to get off and eventually committed suicide. But when the apostle Peter had his great fall, he broke Satan's power and was set free. How? Through repentance. (And God didn't just grudgingly forgive Peter—He completely restored him and made him the head of the early church!)

BREAKING FREE ... *TAKE OUT THE TRASH*

Satan is pretty easy to figure out if you think of sin as filth and rottenness, like the Bible often does. He and his demons are a lot like flies, and flies are attracted to filth and rottenness—garbage, rotten food, rotting corpses—delightful things like that. They love it. For them, the more, the better—but they need us to produce it. So they tell us lies to get us to sin, and as we do they luxuriate in the filth we create. As you and I lust, hate, cheat, steal, etc., it's as if we create a nice big pile of rotting, rancid, stinking garbage.

How does a born-again Christian break free of demonic bondage? It's so simple—just repent. We renounce the sinful action and (of course) the lie that motivated the sinful action. (For more details about how to live a life free of sin, go back and reread Chapter 3.) Repentance means we do a 180-degree turn and change our behavior—stop cheating, stealing, lusting, and obey God. Then Satan and his demons no longer have anything to work with; they have no legal claim. They have no pile of filth to luxuriate in, and their influence is broken. Remove the rotting veggies next to the garden, and the swarming flies disappear. Take away the dead squirrel from in front of your house, and no flies. The same thing applies to the stinking trash under your kitchen sink.

In our lives, spiritual maintenance includes regular evaluation of our actions and thoughts. In biblical terms, we must have *clean hands and a pure heart*. If we are thinking right, we will be acting right ... and if this is the case, there will be no flies, i.e., demons. This is precisely what is laid out for us in another of the most helpful spiritual warfare passages in the whole Bible.

The book of *James* tells us clearly how to beat the devil—take out the garbage. In biblical terms, this means humble yourself and align your heart and mind with the will of God again. As you do, God will break Satan’s power in your life.

Submit therefore to God, resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable, mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you. (James 4:7-10)

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

This chapter began with Sophia’s demonic nightmare. The key to her freedom was discovering the specific lies she believed, which were leading her to sin. Sometimes this process of identifying lies is pretty easy, but sometimes it can be more complicated. Satan and his demons are deceptive, and they don’t want to go. If they can, they will keep leading us down false tracks. When I was almost at the point of giving up, we found the root of her chaos—she was angry at God; in her words, *low-key pissed*.

It finally came out that she thought God had dealt with her unfairly again and again throughout her life. She saw Him as cruel and unjust and believed He delighted in

humiliating her. So she lashed out at God in the only way she knew how—sin hard. This was her way of protesting against all the (perceived) ways that God had *done her dirty*. The more she sinned, the more she gave demonic forces the right to torture and torment and control her ... and they almost drove her over the brink.

Using Scripture, I was able to show her that her ideas about God—*unjust, unfair, cruel*—were completely untrue and unbiblical. All of her bitterness was fueled by these lies in her mind, her twisted vision of God. (I know this sounds so basic, but I have found many born-again Christians with the same problem.) When she finally realized what was going on, she immediately renounced the lies and repented of her sin. When she did this, it was like all the darkness instantly vanished. She was completely transformed, from a stark-raving mad, suicidal woman to a free, peaceful child of God. She is now a dear friend of ours, and we see her on a regular basis. I know this whole process and the results may sound too good to be true, but I have seen it happen many times.

Satan and his demons have millions of lies that they will try to tell us in their attempt to get us to sin. If we fall for a lie and then sin, Satan has a legal claim to latch on and torment us. He can't *own* us if we are born again, but he can *torment* us. All we have to do is renounce his lie and turn away from the sin. When we do, we break his power and, as the book of James says, he must then flee from us. Now that you know, you too can *crush Satan under your feet*.

7

KEY SEVEN: KNOWING GOD'S WILL

How do I know when God is speaking to me?

The center of His will is our only safety— let us pray that we may always know it! —Corrie Ten Boom (1892-1983)¹

Early in (George Müller's) Christian life, he formed the habit, in things great and small, of ascertaining the will of the Lord before taking action, asking guidance in every matter, through the Word and the Spirit.²

MITCH AND GOD'S WILL

Everyone around Mitch seemed to be telling him what God's will for his life was, but he just didn't have peace about it. Mitch seemed a bit desperate as he explained his situation (while teaching me the finer points of barbeque wing etiquette at his favorite campus restaurant). The ministry he was involved with had singled him out as a potential leader, and he was on the fast track to become a

¹ Corrie Ten Boom, *The Hiding Place* (Minneapolis, MN: Worldwide Publications, 1971), 87.

² A.T. Pierson, *George Müller of Bristol, and His Witness to a Prayer Hearing God* (New York: The Baker and Taylor Company, 1899), 113.

point man for this well-known organization. In this position, he would have hundreds of wide-eyed young students looking up to him, following his example, listening to his advice. He began, *They want me to lead Bible studies, to disciple guys, to go to this special leadership thing in another state ... and I'm just not comfortable with it all.*

I proceeded to ask Mitch a series of questions over the next half-hour or so, and together we reached a conclusion. I asked him, *Do you know what the problem is? You just really don't know much at all.* A big smile spread across Mitch's face—he seemed relieved. I continued, *My advice would be to take a deep breath, relax, and take the next year or two to grow—learn the Bible, develop a consistent prayer life, learn how to do ministry, and learn how to hear God's voice for yourself.*

The advice made a lot of sense to Mitch, so he bowed out of ministry leadership (amidst protest from those who were just sure that Mitch was missing God's will). He decided to spend a little more time growing and gaining competency in the most important skill in the universe—hearing God's voice for himself. Mitch and I met regularly after that, and he would often tell me, *I am so glad I decided to back out of that—I have such peace now.*

Mitch's dilemma is similar to what I see all over the place—young people being told to do something (*take a ministry position, change jobs, marry or don't marry this or that person*) because some Christian leader tells them, *This is God's will for your life.* This chapter will focus on the fact that one of the main features of real New Testament Christianity is that God wants us all to learn how to listen to His voice for ourselves. This does take some practice, but every Christian can learn to do it.

As maturing believers, we aren't supposed to let others dictate God's will for our lives. That is what false religions and cults do to control people. One of the beauties of being a New Testament Christian, truly born again, is that everyone receives the Holy Spirit as a teacher and guide. God wants you to learn how to listen to Him for yourself. God often uses other saints to confirm what He is saying, but if you are open and humble, He wants to tell you Himself when He has something important to say. Like everything else in the Christian life, however, learning to hear God clearly is a skill set. So let's start with the easy stuff.

THE EASY STUFF—*DO YOU EVEN KNOW ME?*

Is there anyone you know pretty well—a best friend, spouse, family member? You know their favorite restaurant, and you probably know what they will order. You know what they like to do on a day off (go to a coffee shop, read a good book, go mountain biking). You know what kind of desserts they like, what their favorite movie is. You know what they would do right now if you gave them 100 bucks to do whatever they wanted. Have you ever thought about this—that getting to know God is really a similar sort of thing?

God isn't some mysterious impersonal force, like gravity or time. He is a Person with likes and dislikes. There are things that bring Him joy and things that bring Him grief. Once you really start to get to know Him better, you find there are occasions where you don't even need to pray a whole lot before you make a decision. There was a time, for example, when I was praying about whether to take a step of faith that would involve bringing help to a bunch of orphans overseas. About two minutes into the prayer, I almost

laughed out loud because it seemed like God was saying, *Really?! This is not brain surgery. You know what I like.* (Those weren't His exact words, but it was something like that.) I thought of Scriptures like,

He pled the cause of the afflicted and needy ... Is that not what it means to know Me? (Jeremiah 22:16)

This is pure and undefiled religion: to visit orphans and widows in their distress. (James 1:27)

Once you have walked with God for a while and memorized a lot of Scripture, you often have a pretty good idea about what He wants—His will—without a whole lot of effort. It is advisable to double-check if you can because there may be factors or contingencies you are unaware of, but a lot of times it's pretty "cut and dried," as they say. Now if you haven't spent much time with Him and don't know His Word, you won't even be able to get the easy stuff right. (You are *easy* prey for deception.)

Below are a few examples of easy issues—questions that a typical young person in their twenties might ask God, followed by what I believe God's normal response would be in parentheses. Because His answer will always be consistent with His Word, it is a safe bet that He would respond in the following ways:

Question 1: *Should I forgive that person who hurt me so deeply?* (God: *Absolutely! That's what My kids do. And if you don't, you will damage yourself.*)

Question 2: *Should I be more generous with my resources?* (God: *If you are My child, of course.*)

Question 3: *There is a fatherless kid on the youth sports team that I coach. Should I reach out to him? (God: Get right on that, NOW!)*

Question 4: *Should I go into debt for a super cool car that I don't really need? (God: Don't be ridiculous!)*

Question 5: *Should I date that person at church who is really attractive but has no spiritual fire? (God: Blank stare)*

On what basis would I make the assumption that God would respond in the above ways? Again, HIS WORD, of course. Let's consider the questions above in light of God's Word. Anyone who has prayerfully studied the Bible knows that ...

Question 1: God always (always, always) wants us to forgive. Among other issues, to not forgive opens us up to demonic influence. (*Ephesians 4:26-27; Matthew 18:21-35*)

Question 2: God commands us to be generous ... to the poor, to our friends, even to our enemies (*Hebrews 13:16; Romans 12:20; Matthew 5:45*). This is part of being a new creation in Christ.

Question 3: Fatherless children have always been one of God's top priorities. (*Psalms 68:5; Isaiah 1:17; James 1:27*)

Question 4: Materialism and debt are often the symptoms of a sick, dissatisfied heart. (*1 Timothy 6:6-11; 1 John 2:15-17*)

Question 5: Any young Christian asking that last question has no business even thinking about pursuing a romantic relationship. (*1 Corinthians 7:39; 2 Corinthians 6:14*)

Get to know God better, and a lot of things are really “no-brainers.” Again, it's often a good idea to double-check

about such things if you can; occasionally, there is some factor you don't know about that changes the equation a little. But the mature believer who knows the Bible can often just go ahead and move. They don't need to spend the next three weeks fasting, or wait for an angel to appear.

It is true that there are some situations in life that are not so cut and dried, even for a mature saint. Those decisions will require a little more effort. What do you do then? What if it's a decision between two good jobs, or two good churches, or what college to attend? Maybe it's an issue of going on a mission trip versus living with your unsaved mom for the summer? What do you do then? What about this one—determining if the Christian person you are dating is “the one”? How do we know God's will in these sorts of more complicated situations?

THE MORE DIFFICULT STUFF: THREE LIGHTHOUSES

There is a talk I seem to have at least once a week, and it centers on this question—*How do I know what God's will is for me?* Should I go on the mission trip, take the job, marry the girl, break up with the guy, buy the car ...? To answer the question, I use a little analogy that I picked up from some preacher somewhere. It involves three lighthouses, and the story goes something like this ...

There was once a very dangerous seaport, and the bay leading to it was lined with massive rocky outcroppings. Over the years, many ships had come to ruin on these treacherous rocks. Docking safely, however, was not a problem for anyone who knew about the three lighthouses.

Three lighthouses had been strategically set on the furthest outcroppings, and if a ship were positioned right,

their beacons would form a straight line, 1 ... 2 ... 3. If a ship captain would just keep the three lights in a straight line and keep them starboard (to the right), his ship would come in safely every time. When the wise captain got his ship just so, even if it was a black, starless night, he could safely ease it into port.

Anyone seeking to determine God's will needs to do a similar thing—line up three God-given lights in row, 1 ... 2 ... 3. If they do, they too will come successfully into “port” when making major decisions in their life. So what are these “lights” that we need to align?

First, we should have some sort of inner prompting, a nudge, that we suspect is from the Holy Spirit. Second, we have the Bible and should use it to determine whether this nudge lines up with God's truth. Third, we have godly counsel—we seek the confirmation of wise and mature people in the faith. Line up these three lights, and you will not be dashed upon the rocks, but will consistently find God's will.

LIGHTHOUSE 1: THE NUDGE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

It should be obvious here that we are only talking to those Christians who are truly surrendered to God. If you have unconfessed sin in your life or are holding out on God in some area, make sure you get this right before you try to hear His voice. If you don't, you are setting yourself up for deception. But if you have done this, know that God has given you His Holy Spirit as a guide, and He really wants to speak to you.

This is one of the most amazing things about being a real New Testament Christian—the God of the universe will

regularly be speaking directly to you. On occasion, He will use dreams and visions, but His typical method is something I like to call *a nudge in the Spirit*. This might happen when you are focusing on spiritual things—praying in the morning or studying your Bible—but it could also happen when you are eating your bagel and working on your physics homework.

This nudge thing comes directly from the Holy Spirit to our spirit. When this happens, we usually don't hear literal, actual words. God probably won't say in perfectly enunciated English, *Abby, I want you to give \$100 to your roommate for her summer missions project* or, *Gavin, go to Joe's Coffee Shop and talk with the barista*. The nudge is usually deeper than words, but it is God mysteriously communicating to us. The spiritually sensitive person gets pretty good at quickly translating this nudge into, *I think God wants me to do*

In the book of *Acts*, we see the Holy Spirit leading people in all sorts of very specific ways. To Philip, He says, *Go up to that chariot over there and talk to that guy (Acts 8:29)*. To Peter, *Hey, three guys are looking for you. Get up and go downstairs (Acts 10:19-20)*. To the early church, *Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the mission I have called them to (Acts 13:2)*. Perhaps He said these things in perfectly enunciated Koine Greek, but I suspect He did the Spirit-to-spirit nudge on these occasions, too. Anyone who has walked with the Lord very long will know what I am talking about here.

Now, none of us is very good at hearing God as a baby Christian. And there are other things out there that can give us an inner nudge ... like the flesh or the devil. We are especially vulnerable to deceptive nudges when we are

young and inexperienced, so how do we know if a nudge comes from the Holy Spirit? It could be Satan, or maybe it's just your overactive mind playing tricks on you because you only got two hours of sleep last night. The next thing you need to do is line up the nudge you think God's Spirit just gave you with His Word.

LIGHTHOUSE 2: THE WORD

Chapter 2 was devoted to emphasizing just how important it is to know God's Word. The Bible clearly tells us that we are basically crazy (fools) until we take the time to develop the mind of Christ. The person who takes the time and effort to do this can discern pretty much anything that comes across their path.

But he who is spiritual discerns all things, yet he himself is discerned by no one. For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD THAT HE CAN INSTRUCT HIM? But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Corinthians 2:15-16)

This person who has the mind of Christ can rightly discern the voice of God. When that inner nudge (or a dream or vision) comes, they know whether it is from the Holy Spirit or a counterfeit. How? Not from some mystical sense, but because it resonates with the clear teachings and principles found in the Word of God.

This is exactly what we see going on in the life of Jesus when He goes into the wilderness for 40 days before He launches into ministry. The devil meets Him and tries to tempt Him. I am convinced that the temptations Jesus experienced there were very much like the temptations you and I face—they were suggestions (or nudges) that could have been mistaken for the voice of God. (I do not believe

the devil showed up with a pitchfork wearing red tights. Rejecting that would not have been much of a test.)

So how did Jesus discern that the nudges He was receiving were not from His Father? THE WORD, THE WORD, THE WORD, THE WORD, THE WORD. Every time the devil gave Jesus a nudge, Jesus grabbed hold of it and held it up next to the Scriptures. That is how He determined its source. The devil said, *If You are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread (Matthew 4:3)*. That doesn't sound like a bad thing for someone who hasn't eaten in 40 days. But Jesus saw the devil behind it because this was a temptation to doubt what God had said very clearly. God had already affirmed Jesus's Sonship. No further test was necessary. Jesus basically says, *I'm not going to fall for that. I am not going to test the Father but will stand on what He has clearly said*. He then quotes the Word (*Deuteronomy 8:3*).

There is no way to emphasize just how important the Bible is for every aspect of our Christian life. Jesus summarized it well in the temptation narrative—our very life depends on it.

But He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'" (Matthew 4:4)

The next time you think that God is speaking to you, prayerfully seek out Scripture that would confirm that it is indeed Him. If you neglect to do this when you feel that inner nudge, you will probably live to regret it.

LIGHTHOUSE THREE: GOD'S PEOPLE

Where there is no guidance, people fail, but in an abundance of counselors, there is victory. (Proverbs 11:14)

Do you know older Christians who have a special touch of God on their lives? They seem very sensitive to His Spirit, and God regularly uses them to impact people in a positive way? Maybe you have a wonderful pastor, a mentor, or perhaps your parents or grandparents are wise, godly people. As a third and final way to determine God's will for your life, go and check with them about the decision you are considering.

If you have already lined up the other two lighthouses—you sensed God's inner nudge, and you think you have confirmed it with Scripture—find the godliest people you know and see if they agree with you. If they have the same Holy Spirit inside of them, they should bear witness to what God is saying. This is clearly what we find all through the Bible. In the book of *Acts*, for instance, at one point when God's people needed to make a major decision, they concluded, *It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us (Acts 15:28)*. They humbly sought God's will together, and because they all sensed the same thing, they concluded that God was in it. You and I would be wise to follow the same pattern.

I believe this is the point Jesus is making when He says that if two or three agree on anything, He will do it for them:

Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have

gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.
(Matthew 18:19-20)

Some people think that this is some sort of magic formula—just get two or three Christians together, and God will do whatever you want—a Mercedes, or a trip to Hawaii. No! This is actually saying that if two or three truly humble saints get together and seek God’s will on something, there is a very high probability that together they will be able to figure out God’s mind. So first you get the nudge, then you check the Scriptures, then you confirm it with God’s people. 1...2...3. Then bring that ship into dock.

I have found the above method—the three lighthouses—virtually foolproof in my 35 years of walking with God. As you grow older, you get better at figuring out God’s will, so I don’t have to check with others for absolutely every decision in life. But on the major things, I still check with my wife, then make a few phone calls—to a pastor friend in Colorado, then a godly older missionary in Chicago. Then I go to coffee with a couple of wise, godly people who live close by and ask, *What do you think about this?* If they all sense that the decision I am about to make is God’s will, I move forward with confidence.

AND FINALLY: RELAX, GOD LOVES YOU— PROVERBS 3:5-6

There is one last thing that needs to be said about discerning God’s will. After you have done your due diligence—humbled yourself, prayed, studied, consulted the godliest people you know—you will come to a conclusion (at least it will be the best conclusion you are able to make). At this point, it’s time to act—*talk to that friend, give that*

car away, take the job, go on the mission trip (or not), go to grad school (or not), get engaged ... or break it off. You checked all three lighthouses, so move.

Often, however, it's at precisely this point that the devil weasels in and starts to fill you with fear and doubt. *Maybe it's not God's will. Maybe you are making a huge mistake. Maybe the consequences will be disastrous.* This sort of second-guessing is enough to make some people freeze in their tracks. Don't do that! Their thought seems to be: *Not moving at all is better than possibly making a wrong move.* Personally, I believe that freezing in fear is virtually always a wrong move. This is Satan's last-ditch effort to keep you from blessing.

There is no need to fear. Even if you are wrong, you need to know that God appreciates your heart, your humility, and the effort you put into your decision making. If He needs to, He is more than willing and able to redirect you. To this day, I still pray something like this, *God, I am making my best "faith move" here. I believe I have discerned Your will, but if I am wrong, please redirect me.* He actually did redirect my life at a few crucial junctures when I was younger and didn't have my discernment as finely tuned.

Ultimately, we can rest in the promise found in *Proverbs* 3:5-6, which actually reads a little bit differently in the original Hebrew than most of us think it does. It tells us that if we "know" God, He will make sure to lead our lives, even when we don't quite have perfect clarity. It says,

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways, know Him, And He will make your paths straight.

I am convinced that if I am sincerely trying to walk obediently with God, even if I lack a little clarity at times, even if I make a little misstep, He has promised to get me where He wants me to be. I have learned to relax. He has given us a method for finding His will, but even deeper than that He has promised to fulfill His will in the lives of those walking in intimacy with Him, those who are really striving to *know Him*. Do your best to make a wise, godly decision, and then rest in the love of God.

THE ONE NECESSARY THING

In a real sense, this is the great objective of Christian discipleship. It is the way we fulfill our destiny as God's image-bearers. Jesus calls this *the one necessary thing—sitting at His feet, listening to His Word*. Figure out how to do this well, and you will be God's agent of change on earth.

The actual phrase *sitting at His feet, listening to His word* comes from the Gospel of Luke, in an account where two sisters were trying to please Jesus in very different ways (*Luke 10:38-42*). Martha, the older one, was running around like a chicken with its head cut off, doing anything and everything she could think of to make Jesus's stay at her house welcoming. Her younger sister, Mary, just sat quietly at Jesus's feet, hanging on every word that came from His lips as if her life depended on it.

Martha got frustrated at Mary for sitting around seemingly doing nothing and politely asked Jesus to tell Mary to basically *get off her can and help out* (my very rough paraphrase). But from Jesus's perspective, Mary was doing something. In fact, she was doing the most important thing any human being can do—she was *sitting at His feet*

listening to His word (Luke 10:39). Jesus then gave Martha a gentle rebuke to straighten her out.

Martha, Martha, you are anxious and bothered about many things, but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the better thing, which will not be taken away from her. (Luke 10:41-42)

What was Mary doing? Instead of assuming that she knew what was best for God and everyone else, Mary wanted to really know the mind of Christ (the will of God). This is the one necessary thing in life, and it is worth infinitely more than all our busy activities.

This has always been what God has desired of His little image-bearers. This is why He gives us the Bible. This is also the thing the devil is trying so hard to oppose in our lives. Our success in life depends upon our ability to hear and follow the will of God. All through the Bible, God says this over and over again in different ways. He is not so excited about our religious do's and don'ts, our rituals, our chants, and candles, or our ornate temples. What He is really looking for is someone who will hear what He has to say and then do it.

Heaven is my throne, and earth is My footstool, where then is a house you could build for Me? ... For My hand made all these things. ... But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and lowly of heart, who trembles at My word. (Isaiah 66:1-2)

Very early in this book, we introduced a guy by the name of Jason. He came face to face with the biblical truth that Jesus is looking for people who truly surrender to Him as Lord. He isn't just interested in providing us with fire insurance; He wants us to surrender and obey. This is where

all of us have to begin. It is only when people like Jason (and all the rest of us) really surrender to God and then strive to hear His voice that our supernatural life begins.

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

We could say that our book has really come full circle—*it's all about hearing the voice of God*. We are saved so that we can hear God's voice and do His will (Chapter 1). His voice is made clearer and clearer as we get to know the Bible deeply (Chapter 2). We can then defeat sin—all those things opposed to God's will (Chapter 3). If we are hearing Him, we can pray rightly and move God's powerful hand (Chapter 4). We can also receive the power of the Holy Spirit so that we can supernaturally partner with God (Chapter 5). In addition, if we hear Him we will regularly defeat Satan (Chapter 6). You see, the whole operation really centers on hearing His voice, a.k.a. knowing His will.

Sometimes it doesn't take a lot of time and effort to determine God's will, but at other times the issue isn't so clear. God has given us His Spirit, His Word, and His people to help us work it out. The young disciple who gets into the habit of lining up their three lighthouses will find increasing joy, peace, and fruitfulness. They will be fulfilling their created purpose. They will be doing *the one necessary thing*, and the supernatural touch of God will be on their life.

8

KEY EIGHT: THE POOR

Just how important are the poor?

Listen, my beloved brethren: didn't God choose the poor of the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? (Jas. 2:5)

A Father to the fatherless and a judge for widows is God in His holy dwelling place. (Psalm 68:5)

THE BOY WHO WOULD BE ROYALTY

The little ten-year-old boy was named King, but his life was the furthest thing from royal. His heroin-addicted father was usually out on the streets, and his mother was too broken to even hold down a job. The night I met him, King and his mom were wandering around downtown Denver, homeless. He later told me that he remembers that night well—he was scared and angry; scared to be a ten-year-old out on the cruel streets, and angry that once again forces beyond his control had landed him out in the cold.

Desperate, he and his mother knocked on the door of a downtown mission. It was after hours, and the door was locked. Thankfully, the owner was a friend of mine and had given me a key. I just happened to be there praying with a

young man I was discipling named Craig. We had just finished praying very specifically that God would allow us to lead one soul to Christ that night. Then came the *knock, knock, knock*. That one soul was King.

That was actually a couple of decades ago, and as I write this King is participating in a summer mission in Columbia. He recently graduated from the university in our town and is working on a degree from one of the best evangelical seminaries in the U.S. What miracles I have seen God do in and through this young man, who has gone from being a homeless and hopeless inner-city kid to a son of the KING! I wonder what would have happened to him if God had not met him on that cold winter evening?¹

The reason I was downtown that night was because I had just gone through a major paradigm shift. God had totally shaken up my view of Christian ministry. Before my big change in thinking, I assumed that some of God's people were called to the rich, most went to the middle-class, and some very rare birds (like William and Catherine Booth, Amy Carmichael, and George Müller) were called to the poor. However, God had recently opened my eyes to the fact that according to Scripture, every one of his children has a calling to the poor, the oppressed, and the broken. This is a hard pill for a lot of religious folks to swallow, but to miss this is to miss one of the great themes of Scripture.

This is pure and undefiled religion: to visit orphans and widows in their distress. (James 1:27)

¹ Since writing this, King (his real name is actually "King" in another language) has graduated from seminary and is now an assistant pastor with the Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination.

A KEY FROM ISAIAH

As long as I have been walking with Jesus, the subject of historical revival has intrigued me (some friends would say it's more like an obsession). Historical revival refers to those times in history when God's Spirit comes in supernatural power, much like He did in the book of *Acts*:

And when they had prayed, the place where they were gathered was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the Word of God with boldness. (Acts 4:31)

Tragically, the subject of historical revival has been much neglected over the last 100 years, and many pastors and theologians today know almost nothing about it. But the fact is that down through history God has visited His people with jaw-dropping power ... when they make a way for Him. To even begin to sample the subject would take another book, but anyone interested in diving in should look up videos, lectures, and books by Oxford Ph.D. James Edwin Orr.² Here is a little sample from a seminary graduate who heard one of these lectures by Orr:

I listened in amazement and rapt attention to story after story of how God poured out His Spirit upon person after person and church after church until an entire nation was consumed. Young men had visions, old evangelists dreamed dreams ... tens of thousands of converts confessed Christ for the first time ... churches were filled to overflowing, sometimes around the clock for 18 months. Judges were issued white gloves because crime

² Audio and video archives, as well as a book list by James Edwin Orr (1912-87), can be found at www.jedwinorr.com

*had become almost non-existent ... It was a time of Divine visitation when, in the description of those who witnessed it, the fire of God fell and consumed everyone and everything in its path.*³

How do God's people make way for a supernatural, sweeping move of God on earth like that? Anyone who looks into the classic writings on historical revival (by Wesley, Whitefield, Edwards, Finney, Goforth, Lloyd-Jones, and others) will find the same themes emphasized over and over—the *importance of a true salvation experience, holiness, intercession, and the power of the Holy Spirit*. However, a fact that is often overlooked is the important role that the poor have played in these moves of God.

My eyes were finally opened to just how important the poor are by studying the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. In the 58th chapter, God's people are longing for His presence, and yearning for Him to come in power ... but He is ignoring them. They even go without eating for a prolonged period (fast) in an attempt to get His attention, but it doesn't work. Then God speaks, and His response is pretty straightforward. He basically says, *Once you show a real concern for the poor, oppressed, and broken, I will pay attention to you!* This passage hit me like a hammer:

*Loosen the bonds of wickedness,
Undo the bands of the yoke,
And let the oppressed go free
And break every yoke.
Divide your bread with the hungry
And bring the homeless poor into the house;
When you see the naked, cover him;*

³ R. Maurice Smith, *When the Fire Fell: The Great Welsh Revival of 1904 and Its Meaning for Revival Today* (Reno: Preparedness, 1996), 15.

*And don't hide yourself from your own flesh.
Then your light will break out like the dawn,
And your recovery will spring forth quickly;
And your righteousness will go before you;
The glory of the LORD will guard you from behind.
Then you will call in prayer, and the LORD will answer;
You will cry, and He will say, "Here I am." (vv. 6-9)*

This passage pierced me to the heart. I immediately began asking God what He would have me do. He quickly pointed out that in our city, there was an overlooked, neglected stratum of society—the street kids. These hundreds of throw-away teens slept in parks and alleys by night and hung around begging and causing trouble by day. They were dirty, rude, and had absolutely nothing to give me in return. I began taking regular trips to the outdoor mall in the heart of downtown Denver, where these kids often congregated.

To be perfectly honest, when I started I had no idea what I was doing (there was no manual). I felt like a stumbling, bumbling spiritual klutz, but the truth is that I entered into one of the most supernatural seasons of my life. What I discovered was that God was just waiting there among the street kids with His power and presence. Just like He promised in *Isaiah 58*, His glory did come, and when I prayed amazing things happened. It was during this time I met King, who became one of the most important people in my life for the next 20 years.

Since God opened my eyes, I have made an effort to target the poor with God's love. From street kids to prisoners to orphans in Africa, I have found that when we go to the lowest and least, God is there just waiting to blow our minds. Tragically, many Christians today are much like the people

in Isaiah's day, wondering, *God, where are you? Why do you seem so distant?* If we had eyes to see and ears to hear, I think often His response would simply be this—*I am among the poor! Go there, and I will be waiting for you.*

BIBLICAL EVIDENCE

If we are able to lay aside some of our biases (*construals*) and be like a person reading the Bible for the first time, we might conclude that God has a preference for the poor. The truth is that God doesn't love the poor more than the rich. He just finds the poor a whole lot easier to work with. Old Testament prophecies about Jesus specifically note that the poor would be the primary target of His ministry.

The Spirit of the LORD God is on Me because the LORD has anointed Me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent Me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn. (Isaiah 61:1-2)

Scripture reveals that Jesus was born into a poor family, and He specifically directed His ministry to the poor (*Matthew 11:5*). He said that the poor were particularly favored: *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven (Luke 6:20)*, and also said that people would have better luck trying to force a massive camel through the eye of a needle than to get a rich person saved (*Matthew 19:24*). There is so much evidence for this apparent bias for the poor in both Testaments that only a blind person could miss it. The following rebuke comes from the epistle of *James*.

Listen, my beloved brethren: didn't God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor. Isn't it the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called? (Jas 2:5-7)

Is the problem that God does not love the rich? No, no, no. We must not miss the broader issue. Of course, God loves the rich—*His compassions are over all His works (Psalm 145:9)*. The problem is that the rich, as a rule, are just not all that interested in Him. We could look at it this way—Jesus said that His disciples would be *fishers of men (Matthew 4:19)*. Fishing is just a lot better among the poor—they often want to be caught by God. The rich simply aren't all that interested in God catching them.

I recently attended a conference and heard the testimony of a young minister who had been mentored by one of the great Christians of our generation, David Wilkerson (author of *The Cross and The Switchblade*,⁴ founder of *Teen Challenge*, and pastor of *Times Square Church*). This young man told us of a day that Wilkerson revealed the key to his ministry success. It was no ancient cryptic formula. All Wilkerson said was this—*Go to the poor*. This simple truth has been proven again and again and again down through the ages. God moves among the poor. That's why that great champion for the poor, William Booth, could say,

I am not waiting for a move of God, I am a move of God!

⁴ David Wilkerson, *The Cross and The Switchblade* (New York: Bernard Geis Associates, 1963).

HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

Finding this connection between God's best and brightest saints and the poor is as easy as falling off a log. These powerhouses understood that God moves easily among the have-nots, the throwaways, the poor.

For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; because God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and God has chosen the low things of the world and the despised, the things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. (1 Corinthians 1:26-29)

We have mentioned that great man of faith George Müller many times in the pages of this book. What was he most famous for? Caring for 10,000 orphans in his Ashley Downs Homes.

Charles Spurgeon is well-known for being the most famous pastor in the English-speaking world of his day. What is not so well-known about him is that he was also an advocate for London's vulnerable and orphaned children, opening the Stockwell Orphanage, which eventually housed 500 street children.

Charles Finney was one of the greatest instruments of God during what is known as The Second Great Awakening. Many are unaware that he was also a champion for the most impoverished, abused social class of his time—slaves from Africa. Aside from his fiery preaching against slavery, he insisted that his Oberlin College be fully integrated (in the 1800s!) and made it a stop on the Underground Railroad.

The man who almost single handedly brought an end to the slave trade in the British Empire was William Wilberforce. He was a Member of Parliament and an unapologetic Bible-believing born-again Christian. He was part of the Clapham Sect, a group of influential disciples who sought to bring hope and change—through education, labor reform, prison reform, etc.—wherever poverty and oppression were crushing the life out of people.

Time does not permit us to sample even a fraction of the evidence, but we can close our case with the following example. One of the greatest warriors for the gospel and champions in the fight against poverty and oppression in the 1800s was William Booth (1829-1912), founder of The Salvation Army (which used to be much more than used clothing stores and bell ringers). Charles Spurgeon once said that 5,000 additional police officers in London could not curb crime as well as Booth and his army. Booth had the audacity to write a book in which he proposed how to solve England's poverty issues and all the sins and crimes that accompanied it—*In Darkest England and The Way Out*.⁵ The following words commemorate the General's fiery passion for the poor and oppressed:

*While women weep, as they do now, I'll fight
While little children go hungry, as they do now, I'll fight
While men go to prison, in and out, in and out, as they
do now, I'll fight
While there is a drunkard left,
While there is a poor lost girl upon the streets,
While there remains one dark soul*

⁵ William Booth, *In Darkest England and The Way Out* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1890).

*without the light of God,
I'll fight—I'll fight to the very end!*⁶

Anyone who would follow Booth's lead can expect the kiss of God on their ministry efforts ... just as God promised in *Isaiah 58*.

*Then your light will break out like the dawn,
And your recovery will spring forth quickly;
And your righteousness will go before you;
The glory of the LORD will guard you from behind.
Then you will call in prayer, and the LORD will answer;
You will cry, and He will say, "Here I am." (vv. 8-9)*

I am so grateful that God showed me the importance of the poor all those years ago and sent me out to the street kids of Denver. If you follow the view of many today that God is perfectly fine with His children avoiding the poor, as if they are someone else's assignment, you may very well miss His power and glory altogether. If you want to see God's power, go to the poor.

⁶ According to Salvation Army tradition, these words were part of William Booth's last speech at Royal Albert's Hall, London, May 19, 1912.

9

KEY NINE: THEODICY

How do I make sense of the suffering in my life?

It is exceedingly strange that ... it has been so little weighed or understood by the generality of Christians, especially considering that it is not a matter of mere curiosity but a truth of the deepest importance.
—John Wesley (1703-91)¹

For the creation was given over to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the choice of the One who gave it over, in hope ... (Romans 8:20)

LYNETTE LEARNS TO LOVE

On the day she was baptized, Lynette had a massive hill to climb. She married her husband Rod years prior in an act of youthful rebellion. He was almost 15 years her senior, and once the initial rush was over they realized that they had very little in common. He owned a liquor store and raced cars, and she worked at the local hospital. Their life together became one of loveless coexistence, merely tolerating each other. He was cold and rude and had little interest in her.

¹ From Wesley's Sermon titled, "God's Love to Fallen Man," based on Romans 5:15.

After Lynette surrendered to the Lord, she realized that He was calling her to do something radical—to love Rod and to honor him. Over the years she had grown to resent him. Love seemed almost impossible to her, but she prayed diligently, *Lord teach me to love him like You love him.*

Then came the trial—Rod was diagnosed with brain cancer. At first, it was just trips to the doctor, but it wasn't long before Lynette was required to serve Rod in the most humbling ways. Somewhere along the line, during the strain, confusion, and inconvenience, Lynette realized that her prayers were being answered—she was beginning to truly love and honor this difficult man. New compassion began growing inside of her, and serving him became a joy.

As the disease rapidly progressed, she became deeply burdened for his salvation and found herself praying with tears that God would break his hard heart and bring him to repentance and faith. As things worsened, Rod didn't seem to change and showed no interest in the things of God. Lynette kept interceding, *Open his eyes, Lord! Reveal Yourself to him!* Again and again, she tried to get him to come to church, but he would just brush her off.

Then one night, the strangest thing happened. Out of the clear blue, Rod said he wanted to go to church. Lynette was taken aback. Even more amazingly, during the service Rod went forward to take communion. Our entire church watched in awe. Then one of the younger church members boldly walked up to Rod and asked him if he wanted to give his life to Jesus. He said, *Yes.* I had the amazing privilege of explaining the gospel to him and leading him into the kingdom that night. That was the very last time Rod ever walked out of his house on his own strength. Though he was fading quickly and the tumor was taking its toll, Rod had

clearly changed. He died at home, passing from this life as Lynette lay beside him in bed, singing hymns to him.

If you were to ask Lynette if anything good came out of that brutal trial, she could talk for hours. She went deep into God's Word and learned things she had never seen before in that trial. She learned how to pray with tenacious faith in that trial. She experienced the love of God's people in that trial. And because of that trial, Lynette can now look forward to seeing the man she learned how to love in eternity. One of the best things of all, at least from God's perspective, is that because of that trial, Lynette became a lot more like Jesus. God didn't cause all the suffering and pain, but He used it to serve His highest purposes for Lynette and Rod ... just like He promised.²

God causes all things to work together for the good of those who love God and who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew He predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son. (Romans 8:28-29)

WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD

Warning: Countless Christians have not taken caution and have been crippled or destroyed by the issue we are addressing here—*How do we make sense of the evil and suffering in this world.* We need to begin prayerfully, with humility, fear, and trembling. We are attempting to plumb

² Since this book was written, our good friend Lynette moved to our new town, joined The Refuge Fellowship, and now oversees our women's discipleship house. She also recently joined the board of our international ministry, which helps Christians in developing countries with spiritual and economic development. (See her testimony on the "Refuge Narratives" channel on Youtube: <https://youtu.be/wntoOT-ErGQ>)

the depths of the deepest sea here—*the mind of God*. We must not crash boldly in where angels fear to tread. Human reasoning can lead to tragedy, and WE NEED DIVINE GUIDANCE.

Making sense of God's goodness in the face of suffering and evil (*theodicy*) is one of the great mysteries of human existence. It has strained the brains of the greatest thinkers down through the ages. Pretty much everyone who is anyone in intellectual history has taken a crack at it. But again, we need to be very careful when pondering the question, *Why does God allow suffering?* This is one of those places where Satan and his demons sit, licking their chops, ready to fill your mind with lies. Warning: One misstep here can totally, utterly shipwreck you.

Before proceeding further, it would be wise to visit the Scripture that hits this problem head-on—the oldest book in our Bible, *Job*. There we read about a suffering man trying to make sense of life as wave after wave of excruciating trials crash over him—*the death of loved ones, poverty, sickness, rejection*. The longer Job's season of suffering lags on the more frustrated he becomes, until he is just shouting in anger at the sky. God finally can't take anymore, breaks in, and tells Job that he doesn't have a clue about what is happening to him. *Who is this who obscures My counsel with ignorant words? (Job 38:2)*

God then asks Job several chapters' worth of questions to try and bring him back to his senses (*Job 38-41*). To paraphrase, God asks Job things like, *Do you know the aerodynamics of a hawk? Do you understand the laws of gravity? Do you know how I hold the stars in the sky? Do you know the gestation cycle of a mountain goat?* God's clear implication is this—*Job, if you don't know such basic*

things about creation, why in heaven's name do you assume you understand My ways, the "how and why" of My universe? Job then does the wise thing—he humbles himself, admits he knows next to nothing, and asks God to speak: I will ask You, and You instruct me (Job 42:4).

Like Job, we need to start by acknowledging that our incredibly limited human brains cannot encompass the infinite sea. God does have satisfying answers for the great questions, but we need to come to Him humbly, like a helpless child, to get them. It is a mistake of cosmic proportions to be hasty when approaching such things, or to blindly embrace some answer from popular culture (or even uncritically swallow what our favorite pastor has to say). If there is an answer to be had to this mystery, it must come to us *through His Spirit and His Word.*

Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, nor has even entered into the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him. But to us, He has revealed them through the Spirit. (1 Corinthians 2:9-10)

THE INNER SANCTUM OF GOD'S MIND

In the New Testament, the problem of evil and suffering is dealt with extensively in the book of *Romans*, particularly in the eighth chapter. Whenever I contemplate this section of Scripture, I feel a sense of awe, as if I am entering into the inner sanctum, the holy of holies. Here we are told that this world is full of suffering, and yes, God allowed it. But we are also told that God had a very good reason for doing this. *The creation was given over to frustration ... in hope (Romans 8:20).*

In the following pages, I will try to break some of this down as I have come to understand it. I know that some very

good people will disagree with me on points. Still, my view has allowed me to keep intact a vibrant faith in an all-powerful, all-loving God in the midst of a world where children suffer, natural disasters strike, and young women like Lynette lose their husbands to cancer. This chapter may seem a bit more difficult and heady than some of the others, but I believe sorting through this question is really a must for every serious Christian.

Anyone familiar with the massive literature on the problem of evil will soon recognize that I am appealing (in part) to one of the most common theodicies out there, often called a *free-will theodicy*. Countless great minds have argued along these lines. Christian thinkers from Augustine (354-430) to C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) to contemporary philosopher Alvin Plantinga (b. 1932) have believed that God-given *free will* is the primary way to make sense of God's goodness in the face of a universe full of suffering.³ I agree, but what I am arguing does not stop there. I will also appeal to another sort of theodicy, often referred to as a *soul-building theodicy*. The soul-building theodicy holds that ultimately God allows suffering because it facilitates growth in us and fulfills God's intended purpose for creating us.

Romans 8 blends together aspects of both the free-will theodicy and the soul-building theodicy. In short, suffering is the by-product of our sin, which comes from an abuse of free will. God allows this because suffering serves as the crucible where we, His image-bearers, can reach our fullest potential. All this may be a little confusing to the uninitiated,

³ C.S. Lewis's *The Problem of Pain* (United Kingdom: The Centenary Press, 1940) is a very helpful introduction to this view. Alvin Plantinga's landmark work *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) is written for philosophers, but (quite frankly) virtually impossible for non-philosophers to hang with.

but it will be well worth the effort to soldier on through it. The following will consider, point by point, how the apostle Paul dealt with the issue.

WHERE DOES SUFFERING COME FROM?

The creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it in hope that the creation itself would be set free from its slavery to corruption, into the glorious freedom of the children of God. (Romans 8:20-21)

In a moment, we will be looking at how God uses suffering to shape us and conform us to His image. But first, where does it come from? It is clear from Scripture that God uses suffering, but does He cause it? If we use Jesus as our lens for understanding the Father, as the Bible tells us to (*John 14:8-9*), is there any indication that Jesus was into causing suffering and pain in people's lives? *NO!* The same thing can be said of His Father—He doesn't cause it or create it ... but He does use it. So we are left with the question of just where did the horrors of this world—cancer, babies dying, tsunamis, famines, etc.—come from?

The biblical answer is quite simple and all-inclusive—SIN. A careful study of Scripture reveals that virtually all the suffering on our planet is simply a byproduct of sin. Whenever we do something in violation of God's will, it's like we sow a terrible seed, and the inevitable result will be corruption, suffering, and ultimately death. *Don't be deceived ... whatever a man sows, he will reap (Galatians 6:7)*. The earth was pristine and perfect until sin. There was no cancer, poverty, or even death until sin. So God doesn't cause suffering, pain, mayhem, and death. We did ... and do.

Just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned. (Romans 5:12)

Each one is tempted when he is enticed and carried away by his own desires, and when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. Do not be deceived. (James 1:14-16)

Of course, this does not mean that every time you suffer, it's because of some sin you just committed. It's way more complicated than that. Often you and I are just happily walking through life and—*WHAM!*—we stumble smack into chaos that someone else created. Your suffering today could have its origin in something someone else did decades, centuries, or even millennia ago. The fact is that we simply live in a world full of fire, full of suffering—some of it caused by us, much of it caused by others.

Why doesn't God just smash in and keep all the consequences of human sin—all the suffering—from taking place? Why doesn't He run around with a magic wand erasing all the negative consequences of our stupid, selfish, sinful human choices? I don't have all the answers, but for one thing—if God did this, then sin wouldn't really make any sense to us. We wouldn't think it was such a bad thing. The fact is that every sin carries destruction and death with it. Sinful actions by their very nature ruin the goodness of God's creation. This is what makes them sinful.

What benefit were you deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed (sin)? For the outcome of those things is death. (Romans 6:21)

What is clear is that God gave us a real choice—the ability to love and obey Him, as well as the ability to reject and disobey Him. He also determined that as a rule, He would allow us to experience the consequences of both. He chose to let evil decisions run their natural course—destruction and death—resulting in a world full of suffering and pain. We may not like it, but AS A RULE, GOD LETS THE PROCESS PLAY OUT. In the lives of those who don't love Him, the fire of suffering may have no good outcome at all. But for those of us who love Him, He uses this fire for a glorious purpose. *(It is worth reminding the reader that we are not left completely helpless down here. God's kids do have the powerful weapon of prayer to change outcomes, but that is the subject of another chapter.)*

WHY ARE WE HERE?

Whom God foreknew He predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son. (Romans 8:29)

To make a little more sense of the issue of suffering, it is helpful to consider why God created us in the first place. God had something in mind when He made us, and it doesn't take a Bible scholar to figure out what it was. He made us to be like Him (in a limited way).

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness ..." God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (Genesis 1:26-27)

Theologians have let loose an ocean of ink trying to explain just what the image of God (the *imago dei*) is, but allow me to narrow it down to a few very obvious things that

the Bible emphasizes. The image of God in us has a lot to do with certain capacities or abilities that God has given to human beings—things that separate us from all the creatures around us. What are some things that we have that other living things (orangutans and amoebas) don't possess? The most obvious answer would be these three—*intellect, emotion, and will*. We possess these capacities way beyond anything other creatures on earth do.

Someone might be quick to answer that certain animals, like their dog Fluffy, clearly seem to have intellect, emotion, and will. But seriously, if a human being had Fluffy's mind, emotion, and will, they would be living in a special facility under 24-hour care. Your dog can't count to two, has no moral compass, and if you died today, tomorrow she would be chasing squirrels as if nothing happened. Even the most intelligent animals, like dolphins, elephants, or chimps, obviously do not even come close to matching the metacognitive functions of a human.

But we need to take this idea a little bit further. The Bible also clearly seems to refer to the image of God in a more exalted sense. It's not just about having mind, emotion, and will, it's about using these gifts properly, like God does. We might call this *the realized or mature image of God*. (The perfect example of this, of course, is seen in the life of Jesus Christ.) This means that in one sense, we can say that every person on earth, bad or good, bears the image of God, because they have intellect, emotion, and will. But, in a more exalted sense, the image of God refers to the use of those abilities as God intended. The reason God created us was so that we (His image-bearers) would learn to function the way He functions; this is the mature, or developed image of God. Basically, God created us to share His *modus operandi*.

SHARING GOD'S *MODUS OPERANDI*

The last chapter of this book is largely devoted to the most foundational description of God in the entire Bible, *Compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and great in kindness and faithfulness (Exodus 34:6)*.⁴ These are God's definitive words about Himself, spoken directly to Moses, and repeated down through biblical history by prophets, poets, and apostles. If we were created to bear His image ... well, you can do the math. This is the divine *m.o.* This is what the Father is like, this is what Jesus Christ is like, and this is what we, His image-bearers, were created to be.

The Bible could not be much clearer about all this. Again, *Exodus 34:6* is God's *modus operandi*, and it's supposed to be our *modus operandi*, too. This truth is stated dozens of times in dozens of different ways. The apostle Paul could not have been much clearer. According to him, what does the fulfilled or mature image of God in us look like?

And put on the new self, who is being remade according to the image of the One who created him ... therefore put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. (Col. 3:10-12)

This is what Jesus was telling us in the parable of the Good Samaritan—like God, let *compassion* motivate you to extravagant *kindness* (*Luke 10:30-37*). This is why we were created, and this is why we were recreated in Christ (2 *Corinthians 5:17*). But now the question arises, how does God move us from potential to actualization? From simply

⁴ This foundational description of God was first spoken directly to Moses and subsequently repeated and alluded to dozens of times by the biblical authors (e.g., *Numbers 14:17-19; Nehemiah 9:17, Psalms 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2, et. al.*)

having *intellect, emotion, and will*, to using these gifts as God intended? Pay close attention here because this is precisely the point where suffering and evil come into play. God needed a plan, a process, and a place to get His work in our souls done. According to *Romans 8*, this is precisely why He placed us in this world full of suffering.

GETTING FROM HERE TO THERE ... THROUGH SUFFERING AND TRIALS

We are heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ if we suffer with Him, in order that we might be glorified with Him. (Romans 8:17)

In the Bible, suffering is often compared to fire, and it is this fire of suffering that forges us, forms us, and matures us. It takes us from our potential as image-bearers (*mind, emotion, and will*) to our fulfillment as image-bearers (*Exodus 34:6*). Suffering is the thing that God uses to move us from ignorant, selfish, and useless, to what God wants us to be—*compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and great in kindness and faithfulness*.

The idea that suffering is the place where God perfects us, matures us, and grows us is such a dominant theme in Scripture, if we miss it we are just not reading our Bibles. Here is a sample from several biblical authors:

And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance, and perseverance, proven character, and proven character, hope. (Romans 5:3-4)

Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. So let endurance have its

perfect result so that you may be perfect and complete, not lacking in anything. (James 1:2-4)

After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ Jesus, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you. (1 Peter 5:10)

What is it about suffering that makes it such a good place for spiritual growth and maturity to happen? If we lived in a world with no suffering, we would all just sit around sipping lattes and playing on our smartphones. The truth is that we are just plain lazy. Because of the sort of beings we are, we tend to grow only when compelled to—by fire. Test this out for yourself. Look at the lives of the greatest saints in history. Where did God forge His image in them? Suffering! Go talk with the godliest, most useful Christian in your life, and ask them how they got that way.

It's in the midst of suffering that we desperately cry out to God with prayer and fasting, and that's when He reveals life-transforming truths to us. In the fire of affliction we ransack our Bibles, we burn the midnight oil seeking, and we plead for wisdom and grace. It's there, in the midst of suffering, that we are most profoundly *transformed through the renewing of our mind (Romans 12:2)*.

You learn that God is a provider when you are suffering because of lack. You learn that God is a comforter when you are in pain. You learn He is a mighty warrior when your enemies are too powerful for you. You learn that God can give you peace of mind when you seek Him in the midst of confusion and chaos. The fact is that suffering is one of God's great transformative tools. Even Jesus Himself, as a man, was *perfected through the things He suffered (Hebrews 5:8-9)*.

HOW TO MAKE TRIALS WORK FOR YOU

The Bible does not say, *All things work together for the good of anyone and everyone*. It says, *All things work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28)*. This means that you have to trust Him and participate with Him in the fire. It is not inevitable that our suffering and trials will produce Christlikeness in us. In many Christians, they produce brokenness and bitterness (see the warning in *Hebrews 12*). This is because, like every other spiritual blessing we can experience, we must *believe/have faith* in what God has said. If we believe that He will turn all of our sufferings into glory, He will. If we don't believe, there will be no glory.

We began this chapter with the story of Lynette, who found herself in a failing marriage with her husband dying of cancer. Lynette chose to submit herself to God, and she chose to allow God to use her trials for His glory. From our perspective, we could say that Lynette's choice to cooperate with God in faith freed up God to turn her suffering into blessing. Did God put her in a bad marriage? No, she did that herself. Did God create the cancer that was destroying her husband? No, that sort of thing just happens to us as a part of living in a cursed creation—cursed because of original sin.

Lynette could have done what so many people do—whine and complain, blame God and slump into self-pity. Instead, she pressed into the Word and learned that if she would invite God into the situation, He would supernaturally transform it. In my opinion, this is one of the most amazing abilities of God—the way He can take anything, absolutely anything, that is humbly given to Him, and bring glory out of it. But we need to give up our bitterness and blame,

humbly hand Him all our pain, and believe He will do what He has promised: *Work all things together for good.*

A pastor friend once rightly said, *Everyone on earth is in one of two places—they are either in a trial or headed for a trial.* So the next time you find yourself suffering, in small ways or great ways, whether you caused it or someone else did, remember what God's Word tells you—God wants to use it to conform you to His image and bring blessings into your life. This becomes one of the most powerful survival tools we have on this side of heaven.

When He created this world, God knew that His little image-bearers (us) would unleash evil, mayhem, suffering, and death by the misuse of our gifts. Before He set the universe in motion, He had a plan. He knew what He was going to do with the mess we would create. He would make it all serve His purposes. He would use the byproduct of our sin—all the pain and suffering on earth—to become the fire that forges us more perfectly into His image. *Whom He foreknew He predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29).* When we really begin to get this, we can see the unfathomable love of God behind it all, and we can say with the apostle:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... But in all these things, we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from God's love, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35-39)

10

KEY TEN: GOD'S KINDNESS

How can I know God more intimately?

(Henry Moorhouse) ... went through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation to prove that in all ages God loved the world. ... Mr. Moorhouse taught Moody to draw his sword full length, to fling the scabbard away, and enter the battle with the naked blade.¹

Without putting it into such words as to shock themselves or others, many Christians ... look upon God as one of the most selfish, self-absorbed Beings in the universe, far more selfish than they could think it right to be themselves. —Hannah Whitall Smith (1832-1911)²

THE MAYHEM IN MY MIND

In this chapter, the testimony is mine. My spiritual/emotional/physical crash happened the summer after my freshman year of college, as I drove home from Honey Rock

¹ William R. Moody, *The Life of D.L. Moody* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1900), 139-40.

² Hannah Whitall Smith, *The Unselfishness of God, and How I Discovered It* (London: James Nisbet & Co., Limited, 1903), 9.

Camp in Three Lakes Wisconsin (Wheaton College's Northwoods campus). I was there to disciple others, but the truth is that my mind was in total chaos. There were actually days when I feared I might slip over the edge into insanity.

Then came the excruciating headache—it felt as if one of the mauls I had been using all summer to split wood was firmly embedded in the top of my head. As the pain continued, I grew feverish, weak, and lethargic. In a matter of days, my 200-plus pound frame began to wither. I dropped twenty pounds in two weeks. Doctors put me through a battery of tests and tried to figure out what was wrong. *Was it Lyme disease, hepatitis, cancer, AIDS?* No one had any definitive answers. Concerned friends and family told me that I would have to drop out of Bible college.

Looking back on everything now, the only answer that makes any sense is this—my understanding of God was all twisted up, and because of this I was all twisted up. In my mind, God the Father was a difficult, demanding taskmaster, an overbearing despot who seemed impossible to please. I was tormented with depression, fear, legalism, and doubt. Medicine and psychology had no answers for me, but on the day I began to let go of what I thought I knew about God, real healing began. (I later learned that a similar sort of mental duress is frequently found in Christian biography down through the ages—Luther, Whitefield, Chambers.)

The crazy thing was that at the time my health crashed, I believed that I had a pretty accurate understanding of God. I was, after all, working on a degree in theology. I knew the gospel, I had surrendered my life to God, I spent regular time in Bible study and prayer, and I had even led people to Christ. But if you asked me today, I would be the first to tell you that I didn't know much about God's kindness. That was the source of my chaos.

It took me a while, but once I identified the problem, I invited God to totally rework my beliefs about Him. Very specifically, I asked Him to *destroy and rebuild my theology, if necessary*. There had to be something wrong in my mind. To make a long story short, He answered my prayer. As I began to see God in a new light, my doubts, fears, and depression all cleared up like a bad rash.

Humbling myself in this way is one of the greatest things I have ever done. As I began to get my vision of God straightened out, my entire spiritual outlook went through a glorious transformation. Prayer made sense, God's will made sense, and serving God became downright fun.

MISERABLE SAINTS

We have not ceased to pray ... that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will conduct yourselves in a way that is worthy of the Lord, to please Him in everything you do, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. (Colossians 1:9-10)

Even after people are truly saved they often live in torment, and they have no idea that their bad theology is the source of it. The sad reality is that millions of born-again believers out there are holding on to some twisted-up vision of God, and it is twisting *them* all up. As a pastor, I have found this problem to be pandemic, and it lies at the root of the anxiety, depression, and neuroses of so many of God's children. We inherit our distorted vision of God from our parents, our pastors, or our church, and we never question it. Like me, many seeking souls go to Bible college or seminary to find God, and only end up more conflicted and confounded.

Our Heavenly Father wants us to enjoy our relationship with Him. The great objective of our human existence is to really know Him. *This is eternal life, that they might know You, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom You have sent (John 17:3).* One of the kindest things God can do for us is to allow us to be shaken to the core (like I was) so that we trash our twisted-up vision and really get to know Him. Until we get this straight, our entire worldview will be off-center, and we won't be able to experience the peace, joy, and fruitfulness God has for us.

SPIRITUAL DIAGNOSTIC: ARE YOU HEAVY LADEN?

Nothing twists and deforms the soul more than a low or unworthy conception of God. —A.W. Tozer (1897-1963)³

A smart car owner regularly brings their car to a mechanic for a diagnostic check to make sure everything is functioning properly. The mechanic checks the fluids, engine, transmission, electrical, etc., and tells them what sort of shape their car is in. A person who would like to live a long, happy, healthy life takes regular trips to the doctor's office for a similar reason—for the personal diagnostic check known as a “physical.” The doctor pokes and prods and asks questions to determine the state of their health. If the doctor detects a problem—high blood pressure, excess weight, high cholesterol, etc.—he can give them a course of action to take.

What about our spiritual health? Is there any sort of diagnostic test for that? According to the Bible, our spiritual health is determined by one factor—*how well we know God*. The

³ A.W. Tozer, *The Root of the Righteous* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1955), 17.

bottom line is this—if your belief about God (your theology) is true and pure, you are a happy, healthy overcomer. If your theology is off-center, you experience anxiety, frustration, depression, or worse.

Over the years, I have found many spiritual diagnostic verses, and some of them come right out and say something like this, *If you really know God, then your life will be characterized by _____*. To assess our spiritual condition, all we really need to do is look at such passages and ask, *Does this describe me?* Answering no to any or all of them indicates we have a problem. Some people may not like what the mechanic or the doctor has to say, but the facts are the facts.

1. Is there an overall “lightness” and “easiness” in my life?

Jesus said a true knowledge of God the Father would have this effect on a person. If your life (and your religion) is difficult and burdensome, this indicates that you are off-center. You don't know God very well.

No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him. Come to Me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me ... and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light. (Matt. 11:28-30)

2. Is my life free of all anxiety and fear? The Bible says that at the very core, God is love. If we really understand His love, our lives will be free of all fear. A lot of people believe that they are strong in their faith, yet they regularly wrestle with anxiety. The fact is that anxiety is just a sub-category of fear, and the Bible clearly says that those who know God's love are free of *all fear*.

God is love ... There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out all fear because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love. (1 John 4:8, 18)

3. Do I have the courage to do new and daring things for God?

If you regularly freeze in fear and have a hard time making courageous decisions (like giving sacrificially, taking risks to advance God's kingdom, sharing the gospel), this indicates that your theology is off-center.

*Those who know their God will be bold and take action.
(Daniel 11:32)*

4. Do I hate the things the Bible clearly declares to be sin—sexual immorality, dishonesty, unforgiveness, materialism?

More than once, the Bible states that there are people who claim to know God, but their tolerance of such sinful behaviors proves that they really don't. If you are o.k. with ongoing sin in your own life, and do not grieve for the sin in the lives of others, this indicates that your theology is off-center.

*They claim to know Him, but by their deeds deny Him.
(Titus 1:16)*

5. Do I have an inner yearning to obey God in all things? This is sort of the flip side of the previous point. Those who really know God see His goodness behind all He commands, so what He asks is not burdensome. If you have any sort of resentment towards the clear, righteous requirements of God (*forgiving others, handling money rightly, walking in sexual purity*), this indicates that you are off-center in your theology.

The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him. (1 John. 2:4)

6. Do I like spending time with others who are committed to serving God? As a general rule, if you are not active in a local Christian fellowship, this indicates that you do not know God very well. The Bible says that if we love God, we love His people (imperfect as they may be).

*Whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him.
(1 John. 5:1)*

7. Do I regularly give my time, talent, and resources to others, especially those in need (like widows and orphans)? The Bible says that a habit of helping the needy indicates that a person “knows God.” If you do not regularly engage in deeds of compassion, this indicates that you are off-center. You do not know God very well.

He pled the cause of the afflicted and needy ... Is that not what it means to know Me? (Jeremiah 22:16)

8. Do I go through seasons of trial (like sickness, rejection, job loss) with joy and peace? The Scripture says repeatedly that mature believers, those who really understand God and His love, can rejoice in the trials of this life. When they hit a rough patch, their souls are at rest. If you have a hard time doing this, you are off-center in your theology.

*Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... In all these things, we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us.
(Romans 8:35-37)*

9. Do I expect God to move in response to my prayers? If you don't expect God to pay attention to your prayers and answer you in very specific ways, you just don't know Him very well.

The book of *1 John* was written so that we could be confident that we really know Him, and toward the end of the book it says this:

This is the confidence which we have before Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.
(*1 John 5:14-15*)

So how did you do? If you didn't do so hot, don't be discouraged. Even people who are seriously devoted to God (like I was back in Bible college) often come to realize that they don't know God very well. In fact, several major figures in the Bible were deeply committed to God for quite a while before they *really* saw Him clearly. Isaiah was a prophet in Israel for years before a vision in the temple completely remade him (*Isaiah 6:1-8*). Another example of this is the patriarch Job. Before his big revelation, God described Job in this way—*blameless, upright, fearing God, and turning away from evil* (*Job 1:1*). However, Job eventually admits that a lot of his theology was just secondhand information he had picked up from others. He says something everyone should meditate on:

I have spoken about things that I did not know, things too wonderful for me, which I did not understand ... I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore, I retract and repent in dust and ashes. (*Job 42:3-6*)

In a moment, we will look at that great lawgiver and prophet Moses. He was also confronted by the reality that he needed to know God in a much deeper way. This led to the desperate cry, *Let me know Your way that I may know You* (*Exodus 33:13*). In answer to Moses's prayer, God spoke some of the most

important words ever vouchsafed to humanity. Moses received a revelation of God's kindness that became the theological reference point for all the biblical authors (see *Exodus 34:6*). Tragically, most people, including millions of sincere Christians, are missing the message God spoke to Moses (and later confirmed in Jesus). Why? Because Satan's number one objective is to keep us from seeing God clearly. This was his strategy in the Garden of Eden, and it continues today.

The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the glory of the gospel of Christ, who is the image of God.
(2 Corinthians 4:4)

SATANIC SABOTAGE

Ever since the Garden of Eden, Satan has had one primary way to control the human race—to *skew and confuse our conception of God*. Satan does not bother trying to get most of us to deny God outright and become atheists; this would be too difficult a task. We are hardwired to be religious. It's in our original operating system to believe in a Creator and Judge (*Romans 1:19*). Since embracing the idea that “there is nothing out there” is almost impossible for us, what Satan does is defame God's character so that the image in our minds does not line up with who God really is. And since our belief about God is absolutely central to our worldview, when Satan succeeds in sabotaging that, 10,000 other beliefs are corrupted as well.

Attacking the center (God's character) is exactly what Satan is doing with Eve in *Genesis 3*. He succeeds in convincing Eve that God is untrustworthy and unnecessarily difficult. This is how the serpent gets Eve to unplug from God and follow his (Satan's) suggestions—and this is how he continues to control billions of people today. Whether you know it or not, this is one

of the primary ways he torments us even after we become Christians. He gets us to believe that God is unfair, harsh, demanding, unpredictable, etc. We assume we are okay because we believe in God, but there is no joy. We may grudgingly serve Him, but we are frustrated, fearful, or worse.

Most people have never even entertained the thought that what they believe about God may be corrupted and sabotaged by Satan, but if you are a human being on planet Earth, your theology has been targeted. So how do we get free? It's simple. Take the risk that I did and invite God to destroy your theology and rebuild it if necessary. God wants us all to have the correct center, and once we do see it, it's as clear as the sun up in the sky.

SEEING THE OBVIOUS

That you, being rooted and grounded in love, will be able to grasp with all the saints the breadth, and length, and height, and depth, and know Christ's love which is beyond knowledge, so that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:17-19)

Do you remember the name Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) from your high school science class? We could give him another name—*Sees the Obvious*. He was the astronomer who figured out that the Earth is *not* the center of the universe. The theory of an Earth-centered (geocentric) universe came from the ancient Greeks, and virtually every intelligent person in the world used to believe it. As you might imagine, this idea left serious stargazers scratching their heads as they tried to figure out why the heavenly bodies moved as they did. From this completely wrongheaded perspective, the planets weren't traveling in smooth, predictable orbits (as we now know they

do). Their movements seemed catawampus—forward then backward, up then down.

In an attempt to explain this cosmological chaos, some really smart guys came up with complex explanations for the movements of the heavenly bodies. The view that won the day was the theory that they traveled in several orbits at the same time, spinning this way and that way simultaneously. With enough tinkering, these “experts” made it all work, and they could “explain” everything. Obviously, what they really needed to do was face the fact that their center of reference was completely off—the Earth isn’t the center of anything. Because their center was off, all their complex explanations were complete nonsense.

After a long, hard look at the data, our hero Copernicus suggested something radical. He proposed that the planets were not revolving around the Earth at all. Rather, all the planets of our solar system, including Earth, revolved around the Sun. He argued that if people would just shift their center of reference, and make a few other minor adjustments, the mechanics of our solar system would make a lot more sense.

Unfortunately, people’s opinions don’t yield easily, and poor Copernicus’s book titled *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (*On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*) never really caught on during his lifetime. Years later, his theory was revived by some other guys you may remember from science class—Galileo Galilei and Isaac Newton. Once the dust cleared and all the facts were in, people had to admit that Copernicus’s Sun-centered (heliocentric) view made the best sense of things. And the rest, as they say, is history.

I bring up this story about Copernicus, aka Sees the Obvious, because in Scripture there is one description of God that clearly functions as the center, and millions of people (theologians,

pastors, and Bible scholars included) continue to miss it. I never cease to be amazed at how many good-hearted, truly Christian people continue to overlook something so obvious ... just like the sun blazing up in the sky. But for anyone who starts to get it, this will clear up 10,000 other questions they have about God and His ways.

THE BIBLICAL BULLSEYE: *EXODUS 34:6*

Moses, the great deliverer, lawgiver, and prophet (who wrote the first five books of our Bible), came to realize that he had a lot to learn about God, even after he had walked with God for some time. *After* he met God at the burning bush, *after* he delivered Israel from Egypt, *after* seeing the Red Sea part, and *after* receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, he came to see that he still didn't know God all that well. Surprisingly late in the narrative, we find him crying out to God,

*If I have found favor in Your eyes, let me know Your way,
so that I may know You. (Exodus 33:13)*

What follows is one of the most important moments in the Bible. God sets it up by making it abundantly clear to Moses that He is about to do something special. He says that what is coming is a revelation of His *way* (*Exodus 33:13*), His *glory* (*33:18*), and His *name* (*33:19*). These three concepts found in *Exodus 33*—*way*, *glory*, and *name*—are just brimming with theological significance. In the ancient near east, a *name* represented the very essence of a person. *Glory* pointed to the quality of something that makes it weighty or awesome. A person's *way* basically describes their *modus operandi*—we could say *what makes them tick*. God was saying in no uncertain terms, *I AM GOING TO SHOW YOU WHO I REALLY AM!* The long and the short of it all is that God's answer, found in *Exodus 34:6*, is

the definitive divine personality profile in the Bible (the biblical authors after Moses affirm this).

For anyone who wants to get a clear picture of exactly who God is, there is simply no more important verse in the Old Testament. In just a handful of words, God gives us the bullseye, the dead-center of a pure and true theology. We could rightly call it the Copernican center. These are *God's own words from God's own mouth*, telling Moses and us what He is like.

The sovereign Creator of the universe stoops down, and with only a handful of Hebrew words, He tells Moses (*and anyone else with ears to hear*) the great mystery of our human existence. At first reading, the words seem unremarkable, almost cliché. But they are not cliché. (Note: If they don't knock you to the ground like they did Moses, you have missed the point.) From this point on, everyone in the Bible who really knows God sees these words as their theological reference point, their center—the secret that makes sense of everything else.

Then the LORD passed by in front of him and said, "The LORD, the LORD, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and great in kindness and faithfulness."

The more I have studied *Exodus 34:6*, the more convinced I have become of the following—*anyone who misses the message of this verse is largely driving blind through the pages of the Bible*. It is the personality profile of the Main Character. This is why biblical authors from Moses onward refer to it so frequently (see *Numbers 14:17-18; Psalm 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nehemiah 9:17; et al.*).

HIDDEN FROM THE WISE AND INTELLIGENT

One thing is beyond dispute. According to the biblical authors, *Exodus 34:6* has massive theological significance. John

Calvin is exactly right when he says that these words are *as clear and satisfactory a description of the nature of God ... as can anywhere be found*.⁴ More recent scholars have concluded the same thing. Theologian Walter Brueggemann states, *This is an astonishing disclosure of God, which tells Moses (and us) as much about the God of the Bible as any verse can*.⁵ Judaic scholar Abraham Heschel calls them *the words which are of fundamental importance for the understanding of all biblical words*.⁶

Yet there is something inexplicable that has gone on in history, and in particular Christian history. To put it bluntly, it's as if "the wise and intelligent" (scholars and theologians) just don't know what to do with *Exodus 34:6*. As J. Laney notes, *Strangely, this great passage has received little attention from systematic theologians*.⁷ The fact is that there has been virtually no serious scholarship devoted to explaining the meaning of it.⁸ Yes, you heard that right—the most important theological verse in the Old Testament ... no serious studies devoted to it!

It appears that Jesus's words are really true. Somehow, down through the ages, the God of *Exodus 34:6* has remained *hidden*

⁴ Calvin Translation Society, *Psalms* (vol. 4), 6, 275.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, "Exodus," in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 1:947.

⁶ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (1962; repr., New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 374.

⁷ Laney, "God's Self-Revelation," 36-37.

⁸ The very limited number of studies on the formula include: Robert Denton, "Literary Affinities of Exodus 34:6f," *VT* 13, no. 1 (1963): 34-51. J. Carl Laney, "God's Self-Revelation in Exodus 34:6-8," *BSac* 158 (2001):36-51. Graham Cole, "Exodus 34, the Middoth and the Doctrine of God: The Importance of Biblical Theology to Evangelical Systematic Theology," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 12, no. 3 (2008): 24-36.

from the wise and intelligent (Matthew 11:25-30). In Christian theology, it has remained totally out of the discussion. A detailed exposé on the reason for all this is beyond the scope of this study (the subject for another time and another book). But the long and the short of it is this—a straight-forward reading of *Exodus 34:6* just does not line up with what most theologians believe about God. Trying to lay it out as an actual description of God is a bit like poor Copernicus trying to explain his new vision of the cosmos. It runs head-on into centuries of religious thinking.

The simple fact is this—there is nothing in the Bible like *Exodus 34:6*, a string of divine attributes spoken straight from the mouth of God. It is key to knowing God, and it is key to recognizing Jesus Christ as “God in the flesh.” The rest of this chapter will be devoted to unpacking its meaning. But before going there, let’s quickly note what God does *not* emphasize in this great divine personality profile. All those things we *wise and intelligent* humans like to bring to the discussion.

*All systems that deal with the infinite are ... exposed to danger from small, unsuspected admixtures of human error, which become deadly when carried to such vast results. The smallest speck of earth’s dust, in the focus of an infinite lens, appears magnified among the heavenly orbs as a frightful monster. —Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896)*⁹

In *Exodus 34:6*, God does not say much about wrath or judgment, except that He does not like to punish (*slow to anger*). He also says absolutely nothing about His power—not that He lacks power, but this is no big secret. God’s power is obvious to anyone who will take an honest look at the universe (*Romans*

⁹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Minister’s Wooing* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1866), 339-40.

1:19-20). God also says nothing about control, a favorite subject of many theologians (as if the most important thing anyone could ever know about God is that He does whatever He wants ... *so just stop complaining and worship Him*). Also missing from *Exodus 34:6* are all the things we find in our theological textbooks—abstruse philosophical discussions requiring an IQ of 140 or above.

What God gives us in *Exodus 34:6* is a string of simple words that bring peace, rest, and relief to the human soul. It's everything we *NEED* to hear from Him. It's a vision of God that is, quite literally, fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. No 25-cent terms. The words are so simple, in fact, that any small child (or ancient near eastern shepherd) can grasp their meaning. Again, it is a befuddling fact that scholars from all quarters have acknowledged the importance of these words, but it's as if no one will grasp the nettle and explain their simple meaning. Why? Because for the most part, the theological experts are committed to a vision of God that is incompatible with a simple reading of these words that came straight from the mouth of God.

Suffice it to say that anyone who really hungers to know God would be wise to lay down pre-existing, overly philosophical, overly complex ideas about God and examine *Exodus 34:6* like a jeweler examines a priceless gem. Prayerfully turn it this way and that, and marvel at how the words are used throughout the rest of Scripture, and then consider how they are ultimately explained by the life of Jesus Christ, *The Word made flesh*.

LET'S GET TO IT!

The primary emphasis of *Exodus 34:6* is on the forth attribute mentioned—God's *HESED* (חֶסֶד). The closest equivalent we have for *HESED* in the English language is the word *kindness*. But when talking about God's *HESED*, the

English word *kindness* arguably falls short—it's just not awesome enough. Some English Bibles have attempted to remedy this by using the word *lovingkindness*. Whatever English word we use, we need to understand that God's *HESED* is something stunning and glorious, beyond all human speech—*as high as the heavens are above the earth (Psalm 103:11), and better than life (Psalm 63:3)*.

This wonderful thing—God's *HESED*—is what distinguishes the One and True living God from the thousands of unworthy conceptions of Him littering our universe. We could say the whole of *Exodus 34:6* is God's attempt to make sure that we are all straight on just what His *HESED* is all about. The other attributes—*compassionate, gracious, etc.*—are there to illumine *HESED* and cast light on its brilliance, sort of like smaller gems surrounding a center stone. By the specific words He chose, God defines it and tells us how it works.

Here are the cold, hard facts—there are a lot of people who say a lot of things about God, but according to the biblical authors, if they don't know God's *HESED*, they don't know diddly.¹⁰ Again and again the Bible tells us that knowing God's *HESED* is the key to really knowing HIM, and missing it is missing HIM.

*The LORD has a case against those who dwell in the land,
Because there is no faithfulness and no HESED
Or knowledge of God in the land. (Hosea 4:1)*

*Thus says the LORD, "Let not a wise man boast of his
wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let*

¹⁰ Just a warning here. A lot of technical, scholarly studies on the word *HESED* get the meaning wrong. If you really want to understand it, don't try to take a shortcut. Go find all the biblical passages where it appears. The study will be arduous, but well worth it.

not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises HESED. ...” (Jeremiah 9:23-24)

Just how important is it to the biblical authors? The way it is emphasized gives us a clue. God’s *HESED* satisfies the faithful in the morning (*Psalms 90:14*), and follows them all the days of their life (*Psalms 23:6*). It was one of ancient Israel’s favorite things to sing about.

I will sing of the HESED of the LORD forever; To all generations, I will make known Your faithfulness with my mouth. For I have said, "HESED will be built up forever; In the heavens, You will establish Your faithfulness." (Psalms 89:1-2)

The authors of Scripture just couldn’t say enough about *HESED*. It is the wellspring of every good thing in life—abundance, deliverance, wisdom, provision, protection, forgiveness. *Psalms 136* repeats the following refrain 26 times in 26 verses:

Give thanks to the LORD for He is good, for His HESED endures forever ... Give thanks to the LORD for He is good, for His HESED endures forever ... Give thanks to the LORD for He is good, for His HESED endures forever.

The message is clear. According to the Hebrew Scriptures, there is nothing like God’s *HESED*. To understand it is to understand just how good God really is.¹¹ This is why He Himself explains it in such vivid detail to Moses in *Exodus 34:6*.

¹¹ This is precisely what Jesus is saying in *Matthew 9:13* (and *12:7*), when He tells His opposition to study the meaning of *Hosea 6:6*. The Hebrew word being emphasized in *Hosea 6:6* is *HESED*.

THE OTHER *EXODUS 34:6* ATTRIBUTES

So what does God tell us about His *HESED*? God first wanted to let us know that His *HESED* is fueled by an inner emotion more powerful, true, and pure than the affection a mother has for her baby—it is *compassionate* (*rehum*). Start to really grasp this first attribute in *Exodus 34:6*, and you will be on your face.

This is one of the more amazing terms in biblical Hebrew. It quite literally comes from the word meaning “a mother’s womb” (*rehem*). The most primitive meaning of this concept of *compassion* points to the affections that a mother has for the child of her womb. But throughout Scripture, God makes it clear that His compassion is something even deeper, stronger, and better than a human mother’s. The prophet Isaiah tells us that a mother’s compassions can fail, but not so with God’s (*Isaiah 49:15*).

This powerful divine emotion isn’t reserved just for God’s people Israel, either. It’s how the LORD feels about everyone on earth. *The Lord is good to everyone, and His compassions are over everything He has made (Psalm 145:9)*. In an absolutely amazing moment in the Old Testament, one of God’s prophets (Jonah) goes AWOL and refuses to complete his mission. Why? Because he knows that God’s compassion is so vast that He wants to bless everyone ... including Israel’s archenemy, the wicked, warmongering Ninevites. Jonah didn’t want them to have a chance to repent and experience the kindness of God (note how Jonah quotes *Exodus 34:6* here).

But this displeased Jonah greatly, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD and said, "Please, LORD, wasn't this what I said while I was still in my own country? So in order to keep this from happening, I ran to Tarshish because I knew that You are a gracious and

compassionate God, slow to anger and great in HESED, and one who turns away from disaster. So now, LORD, please just take my life, for death is better to me than life."
(Jonah 4:1-3)

God's self-description in *Exodus 34:6* begins with this fact—He loves us all more than a mother loves her nursing baby. He has tender affections for absolutely everyone on earth, even the folks we think are most worthy of death and hell, like the Ninevites. Just stop and ruminate on this idea for a while, especially if you have kids. God's heart for you is more tender and devoted than yours for your children. If this is true, what wouldn't God do for you? Anyone who begins to grasp this first attribute is well on their way to inner peace.

Again and again, the Bible unashamedly tells us that God's heart is on fire with loving affection for us. Even when human stubbornness leads to judgment, what is God doing? The best evidence is that He is weeping (see *Hosea 11:8*). He aches to do good for us ... all of us. As we said already, if this is not how we think (and talk) about God, one of the following must be going on—either He is lying, or we are. (Could that old serpent be back in the mix. *Did God really say ... [Genesis 3:1]*)?

Tragically, in the history of Christian thought (as well as Judaism and Islam), it has been widely taught that God does not actually experience *compassion* at all—at least not as we understand compassion. God just sort of scripts everything out and then lets the script play. *Compassion* from this perspective is just a figure of speech, a helpful, quasi-poetic way for people to talk about God (the 25-cent word theologians like to use is “anthropomorphism”). But if this is the case, why didn't God ever tell us this in His Word? Why didn't He add a little caveat to *Exodus 34:6* and tell Moses that He was just being poetic? Once again, was God lying?

In *Exodus 34:6*, God then goes on to tell Moses that because of this profound *compassion* for people, He loves to break in and meet their need. His *HESED* is not just *compassionate*, it is *gracious* (*hanun*). When God sees us suffering, He wants to help. God is not sitting up in heaven coldly, with His arms folded, waiting for you to perform for Him like a show pony. He is not an angry, red-faced drill sergeant constantly berating you for your failures. The fact is that He is deeply moved by your pain and longs to break in right now and help you ... today. *The LORD longs to be gracious to you (Isaiah 30:18)*.

Regardless of what you or I think about Him, the fact is that God loves to save, heal, forgive, comfort, guide, and provide. So many of us are just flat deceived, but James says, *Don't be deceived ... God is the source of every good gift (James 1:16-18)*. The problem, you see, is not with God. It is with us. We have embraced some perverted vision of Him, so we don't expect (have faith) for all the good He wants to do for us. What more could God say or do? God sent His Son to die for us in the ultimate expression of His *great kindness*. And like Paul says, *If He didn't spare His own Son, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? (Romans 8:32)*. But we are not done yet. *Exodus 34:6* just keeps getting better.

After the LORD tells Moses that He is *compassionate and gracious*, He then tells him that He takes absolutely no delight in punishing anyone. God's *HESED* is *slow to anger* (*erek apayim*). He waits and hopes and longs for the wayward sinner's return. Many of us have this all backward and upside down. We think He is up there with a hammer or a baseball bat, just itching to let us have it. How deceived we are. Everyone who really knows God knows that He always prefers to give second, third, fourth ... and ten-thousandth chances. Is this the God you know?

I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. (Ezekiel 33:11)

These truths—*compassionate, gracious, slow to anger*—then lead us to the great crescendo, the crown jewel of this awesome description of God—His *HESED!* But God wants Moses (and us) to know that His *HESED* is absolutely colossal, enormous, and mind-blowing, so He says that He is *great in kindness (rab HESED)*. Just how massive is it? The Psalmists liked to put it this way—*as high as the heavens are above the earth (Psalm 103:11)*. Once again, all the other words in *Exodus 34:6* were spoken to help Moses appreciate just how glorious this central attribute of God really is.

The fact is that the breadth and length and height and depth of God's *HESED* cannot fully be captured in human terms ... but the biblical authors sure try.

*Your HESED, LORD, extends to the heavens ...
How precious is Your HESED, God.
The children of men take refuge in the shadow of Your wings.
They drink the fill of the abundance of Your house.
And You give them to drink of the river of Your delights.
For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light, we see light.
Continue Your HESED to those who know You. (Psalm 36:5-10)*

Knowing God's *HESED* is really the key to everything. So do you know the God described in *Exodus 34:6*, or has this been eclipsed by some other vision of God? The God of rules, the God of philosophical attributes, the God of control? This verse is the most quoted and alluded to description of God in the Bible and is the bullseye of a healthy worldview. It is the way to a peaceful, fruitful life. Once a troubled soul (like I was) really comes to know the God of *Exodus 34:6*, their frustration, depression, and anxiety will evaporate like the morning mist when the sun rises.

But we are still not quite done with *Exodus 34:6*. There is one more thing the LORD tells us about His *HESED*. It is characterized by *faithfulness (emet)*. What this glorious little word tells us, among other things, is that God and His enormous kindness (*HESED*) will be the same through endless ages, with no alteration or shadow of change. He does not have good days and bad days, and His *HESED* does not waver based upon our performance. He is always, ever, and only this way!

Put everything together and what it means is that *Exodus 34:6* has been, and forever will be, the unchanging *modus operandi* of God. You and I may carry around some other vision of God, but by His own admission, by the proclamation of His *ways, glory, and name*, God says this—His eternal, unchanging obsession is to lavish incomprehensible goodness on human beings ... you and me! This is how He wants us to think about Him and relate to Him. Any other vision of God is a perversion, a distortion, a satanic sabotage.

... And just one more thing. There is something else we need to say about the LORD, with fear and trembling. The very next verse lets us know that although He is mind-blowingly kind, He is no pushover (see *Exodus 34:7*). For anyone who thinks that God's extravagant goodness means they can live however they want, and God will just wink at it, think again. He will forgive any and all sin, but His very nature makes it impossible for Him to wink at our sin. Perhaps we should meditate on this a little more.

God hates all sin in all its manifestations. He is bound by Who and What He is to destroy it. Why? Because sin is the antithesis of God's ways. It kills and destroys the crown of His creation—us. The frightening reality is that the person who is determined to hang on to their sin will eventually be destroyed with their sin. Again and again, the Bible makes one thing

clear—*If a man will not repent, He has sharpened His sword (Psalm 7:12)*. But this is not what God wants at all. This is why it says He is *slow to anger*. What God really wants is for everyone to repent—RIGHT NOW—so that He can lavish His extravagant *HESED* on them. This is the underlying message of the entire Bible. We are sinners, destined for wrath, but God loves us with an everlasting love.

A GUY WHO GOT IT

One man who knew the Lord deeply was King David. God called him *a man after His own heart (1 Samuel 13:14)*. He was also known as *the sweet psalmist of Israel (2 Samuel 23:1)* because he wrote so many beautiful songs about God. Although he lived centuries after Moses, he absolutely loved *Exodus 34:6* and often used it in his songs. David actually wrote one very special song completely devoted to this description of God. If you want to go deep into the meaning of *Exodus 34:6*, meditate on David's *Psalms 103*.

*Bless the LORD, my soul,
And all that is within me bless His holy name.
Bless the LORD, my soul, and don't forget any of His benefits;
He forgives all your iniquities,
He heals all your diseases;
He redeems your life from the pit,
He crowns you with HESED and compassion;
He fills up your years with good things,
So that your youth is made new like the eagle.
The LORD does righteous acts and judgments for all who are
beaten down.
He made His ways known to Moses,
His acts to the sons of Israel.
The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and
abounding in HESED.*

*He won't always struggle with us,
He won't be angry forever.
He has not dealt with us as our evil deeds deserve,
Or rewarded us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
So great is His HESED toward those who fear Him.
As far as the east is from the west,
So far away has He removed our evil deeds from us.
Just like a father has compassion on his children,
So the LORD has compassion on those who revere Him.
For He Himself knows what we are made of;
He knows that we are just dust.*

This song tells us the sorts of things that the God of *Exodus 34:6* loves to do for people—forgive sins, heal diseases, get them out of pits, fill their lives with abundance, forgive, etc. King David had experienced all these things firsthand. For David, God was not some dry theological system, or a series of philosophical attributes. God was a wonderful and winsome Person who delights to give and forgive. David had experienced God's *HESED* in profound ways, and he knew that *Exodus 34:6* expressed this more clearly than any other passage of Scripture.

David understood God's extravagant generosity. He had been a lowly shepherd boy, a nobody, and God raised him up to be the king of Israel. David also knew firsthand all about God's mind-blowing forgiveness. Later in his life (when he knew better), David abused his power and privilege and sinned profoundly. He committed adultery and murder. He knew he deserved to die but threw himself on God's kindness ... and he was forgiven (see *Psalms 51*).

Does your understanding of God inspire you to shout and sing for joy like David? Are you so overwhelmed at His kindness that, at times, you cannot even stay on your feet? If not (to be straight with you), your center is off. Once we really start

to get this, we win. We can say goodbye to our heavy yoke of anxiety, fear, depression, and frustration. We will understand what A.W. Tozer meant when he said, *I have found God to be cordial and gracious and in every way easy to live with.*

ONE FINAL THING, JUST IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

How can we know with absolute certainty that such a straight forward reading of *Exodus 34:6* is really who God is? There is one final piece of evidence that “seals the deal” for any serious student of the Bible. If we turn to the New Testament, we find the biblical writers choosing their words very carefully to make a jaw-dropping point—Jesus Christ was *Exodus 34:6* with skin on.

By the very words they chose the New Testament authors were telling us again and again that Jesus was living out the character of God, *Exodus 34:6*. *We beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).*¹² Jesus is *the Word made flesh* and He shows us exactly how God the Father thinks, feels, acts, and reacts. *No one has seen God at any time ... He (Jesus) explained Him (John 1:18)*. *Exodus 34:6* was God’s detailed self-description, Jesus Christ was God’s final Word on the matter (*Hebrews 1:1-3*).

When Jesus’s disciples once asked Him to show them the Father, Jesus seemed more than a little bit frustrated. They were missing the whole point. Again, Jesus *is* the final, definitive explanation of God and His ways.

¹² New Testament scholars have convincingly argued for the connection between the words of John’s prolog and *Exodus 34:6*. See, e.g., Anthony Hanson, *Grace and Truth* (London: SPCK, 1975), and Alexander Tsutserov, *Glory, Grace, and Truth* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2009).

Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not come to know Me? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; How can you say show us the Father? (John 14:9)

There is a mountain of biblical evidence I could dump on you at this point to prove what is being said here. God is literally, simply *compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and great in kindness and faithfulness*, and He said it one final, definitive time in the Person of Jesus Christ. God feels deeply for everyone, loves with abandon, is impossibly patient, and always overflowing ... and He never alters. Any student of the Bible who misses this description of God misses the main character of the Bible (*and this tragedy happens all the time*).

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, and it is these that bear witness of Me (Jesus), and you are not willing to come to Me. (John 5:39-40)

Start to see God as He described Himself in *Exodus 34:6*, and in the Person of Jesus Christ, and you will absolutely love life. Opt for some other vision of God—one that centers on control, judgment, or philosophical profundity—and be part of the teeming masses who are *weary and heavy-laden*.

Those who are truly free in Christ are growing in their understanding of God's kindness (*HESED*), and Jesus Christ becomes their lens for understanding the ways of God. The former group, the strugglers, may be able to quote creeds and catechisms, they may affirm that there is a great Creator and Judge "out there," they may even have degrees and stand behind pulpits and lecterns. Still, if the God in their head does not line up with the words of *Exodus 34:6* and the Person of Jesus Christ, they have the wrong center.

Let us follow the advice of the prophet and *press on to know the LORD (Hosea 6:3)*. Just believing that God is the Creator and Judge is not enough. Even believing that God is a Trinity, or that He became a man in the Person of Jesus Christ and died on the cross for our sins, does not mean that we know Him intimately. What everyone really needs is a revelation of His heart, His love for us. This is what gives us the light and easy yoke. This is the simple truth that set me free.

Unfortunately, it seems as if some people would rather die with their warped theology than consider the possibility that they are wrong. But if we fail the diagnostic test, if our lives are not characterized by peace, joy, courage, love, and fruitfulness, we need to ask God for a deeper revelation. If Moses could do this, surely we can, too. He is *great in kindness*.

*Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade;
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry;
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky.¹³*

¹³ From the hymn, "The Love of God," by Frederick Lehman (1868-1953).

FARE THEE WELL, NEXT GEN

So that's it. We are now done with the basic, basic, basics of the Christian life. These are the keys I feel so many are missing in our day. I plan on continuing to work with a small group of young disciples, but I thought that a book like this could benefit those I may never have a chance to meet on this side of heaven. I hope that whoever you are, this book touches you, challenges you, and invigorates you. My prayer is that God uses it to raise many in the generation behind mine to bear His glorious image, shake heaven with their prayers, send demons fleeing, and bring God's kingdom to earth.

*Thou Christ of burning, cleansing flame,
Send the fire!
Thy blood-bought gift today we claim,
Send the fire!
Look down and see this waiting host,
Give us the promised Holy Ghost,
We want another Pentecost,
Send the fire!¹⁴*

¹⁴ William Booth (1829-1912). See, "Thou Christ of Burning, Cleansing Flame," (#203) in *The Song Book of the Salvation Army* (Great Britain: The Salvation Army, 1986). This hymn originally appeared in The Salvation Army's periodical, "The War Cry" (1894) on the 50th anniversary of Booth's conversion to Christ.

APPENDIX

SALVATION: HOW CAN I KNOW FOR SURE?

Almost every Christian has wondered on occasion if they are really “in.” The book of *1 John* was written to answer that question. *These things I wrote to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life (5:13)*. This little letter outlines several proofs that demonstrate that the Holy Spirit is really inside a person. *And this is how we know that He lives in us; we know it by the Spirit He gave us (3:24)*. If you are wondering whether you are really saved, *1 John* is the book for you. It points out eight tests that will help you make the call:

1. Real Christians Believe the Right Things about Jesus:

The first thing John emphasizes is that a truly born-again person who has the Holy Spirit in them will have the right confession about Jesus. This test is pretty straightforward—Do you believe the same things about Jesus that John and the other apostles believed? Chapter 1 goes over all this. If you agree with what was said about Jesus in those pages, you are over the first hurdle ... but there are other “checks.”

This is how you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. (1 John 4:2)

The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God makes Him a liar because he has not believed in the testimony that God has given about His Son. (5:10)

2. Real Christians Can’t Keep Sinning: The next thing John emphasizes is that real Christians (those who have the Holy Spirit) are not comfortable living with sin in their life—it

grates on them, it grinds at them. When they have unconfessed sin, they feel like a fish out of water. Obviously, this doesn't mean Christians will never commit sin. John tells Christians what to do when they mess up (*1 John 1:9; 2:2*). But the reality is this—when the Holy Spirit moves in, you are changed at the deepest level of your being. Your innermost person is now bent toward God's will. A Christian may be capable of sin, but they will never again be able to enjoy it like they used to. If you can lie, cheat, steal, or sleep around, and it doesn't gnaw at you, grate on you, bother you ... there is a very good chance you are not born again. But if every time you sin, it feels like fingernails scratching down a chalkboard, that's a good thing.

The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and doesn't keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him. (2:4)

No one who is born of God continues sinning because His seed abides in him, and he cannot keep sinning because he is born of God. (3:9)

- 3. Real Christians Have a New Love Impulse:** The next thing John emphasizes is that real Christians have a strange new impulse to do good for others. Why? Because whether they know it or not, they have entered into a mysterious, mystical union with the Holy Spirit. Because of this, a saved person is only truly happy when they are doing God's will, and this can be summarized in one word—LOVE. One of the strongest indications that you have truly been regenerated, born again, saved, etc., is that you have this unrelenting compulsion to be like God—LOVE!

Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God because God is love. (4:7-8)

But whoever has the world's goods and sees his brother in need and doesn't have compassion for him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or tongue, but in deed and truth. We can know by this that we are of the truth, and this assures our heart before Him. (3:17-19)

- 4. Real Christians Can't Hate:** The next test is closely related to the previous ones, but hatred is such a dark, horrific thing that it's worth giving its own space to. Hatred is Satan's pure, unadulterated essence, so John doesn't pull any punches here—real Christians simply cannot live with hatred in their hearts. Again, this doesn't mean a Christian can't be tempted or even fall into a brief season of bitterness or unforgiveness, but if they do there will be an all-out war going on inside them until they spit the hatred out. The underlying reality is that if you have received God's Spirit, your life cannot be characterized by hatred.

Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. (3:15)

- 5. Real Christians Understand Spiritual Things:** One of the beautiful things about real New Testament salvation is that absolutely everyone has an opportunity to walk personally with God. Religious charlatans are always trying to convince us that there are superspiritual gurus out there with access to truth that is unavailable to the rest of us. The book of *1 John* lets us know that every person who is truly born again receives the Holy Spirit (also called "the Anointing"). This means that they now have the best teacher in the entire

universe living right there inside them. It does not mean that Christians can't benefit from good teachers, but what it does mean is that if the Spirit is really in you, you now have the ability to understand spiritual things. In practical terms, the Bible should have exploded to life when you got saved. That is proof that the Holy Spirit is in you.

As for you, the Anointing you received from Him remains in you, and you don't need anyone to teach you. But as His Anointing teaches you about everything and as that Anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in Him. (2:27)

- 6. Real Christians like Being around Other Real Christians:** We don't need to deliberate too long over this one. If you are really born again, you will like being around other born-again folks. Something is wrong if you still like being with your unsaved friends more than your saved friends.

Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him. (5:1)

- 7. Real Christians Have Their Prayers Answered:** Virtually everyone on earth prays, but only born-again people get to regularly move the hand of God. It is possible that you are just a baby Christian and have not yet learned how to do this, but if you begin having an increase in answers to prayer, this indicates that you have favor with God, you have the Holy Spirit, and you belong to Him.

These things I wrote to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. This is the confidence which we have before Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears

us in whatever we ask, we know that we will receive the requests which we asked from Him. (5:13-15)

8. Real Christians Should Experience Diminishing Fear:

There is a final point worth mentioning here, but it falls into a slightly different category. It isn't simply proof that a person is born again, it is an indicator that a person is maturing, growing deep in their salvation: They are no longer scared of God or anything else in the universe. They aren't afraid because they have come to understand how much God truly loves them and how completely He has taken care of their guilt and shame:

There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out all fear because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love. (4:18)

There you have it—eight proofs that a person is saved. If you believe the right things about Jesus, have a new desire to love others, cannot continue in sin, cannot live with hatred, understand spiritual things, love to hang out with God's people, are seeing prayers answered, and fear and anxiety are diminishing in your life, you are in!