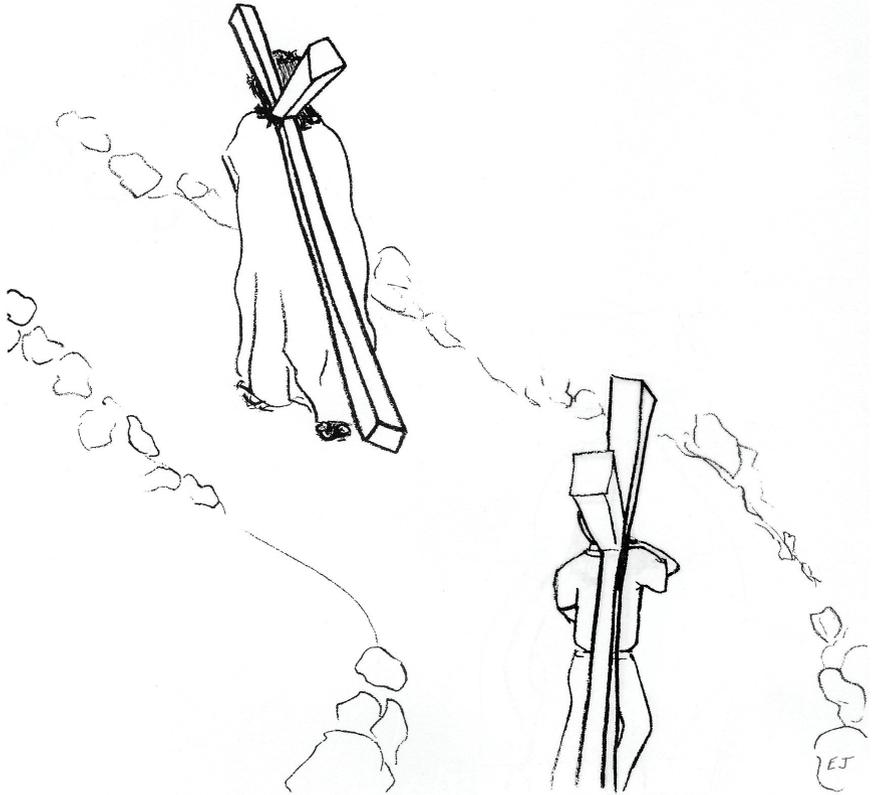


**Experiencing Jesus' Joy  
through  
Obedient Discipleship  
Second Edition**



**Dr. James B. Joseph  
"Brother James"**

# **Experiencing Jesus' Joy through Obedient Discipleship Second Edition**

**DR. JAMES B. JOSEPH | "BROTHER JAMES"**

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**To God Be the Glory!**



## Foreword

Christ prayed that His followers would experience His joy, which was made full at the Cross. God invites every person of every generation to join Him in becoming a member of His eternal close-knit holy family. Upon acceptance, every member is asked to help others who are still living separate from God to know Him and join His eternal family and kingdom. Through the Holy Spirit, God develops love *for all* in the hearts of His family members and commissions each to be His representatives on earth. Like Christ, His followers experience great joy over every individual who is rescued from the deceptions of self-centeredness, selfishness, and Satan.

As you journey through *Experiencing Jesus' Joy through Obedient Discipleship*, the experience should help you understand God more fully and His desired place for you in His family. The critical issue for all is that everyone must decide while living on this side of eternity whether or not they will return God's love and submit to the leadership of the Father's appointed Messiah, Jesus.

As you know God better and realize more fully what He is asking of you and what Satan is doing to quench the leading of the Holy Spirit, you will be liberated to follow Christ more faithfully into spiritual battle resulting in more coming to know God and desiring to be part of His family. As more truly follow Jesus, God will become more fully known and trusted worldwide. Let's not miss out on the best that God has for us and forfeit the excitement, joy, and inner peace of following the King of kings, Jesus Christ, as we work together bringing many into the Family of God!

– In Jesus' Service, Brother James

## **Bible Book Abbreviations Used**

### **Old Testament**

Genesis: Gen  
Exodus: Exod  
Leviticus: Lev  
Numbers: Num  
Deuteronomy: Deut  
1-2 Samuel: 1-2 Sam  
1-2 Chronicles: 1-2 Chr  
Nehemiah: Neh  
Psalms: Ps  
Proverbs: Prov  
Ecclesiastes: Eccl  
Isaiah: Isa  
Jeremiah: Jer  
Ezekiel: Ezek  
Daniel: Dan

### **New Testament**

Matthew: Matt  
Romans: Rom  
1-2 Corinthians: 1-2 Cor  
Galatians: Gal  
Ephesians: Eph  
Philippians: Phil  
Colossians: Col  
1-2 Thessalonians: 1-2 Thess  
1-2 Timothy: 1-2 Tim  
Hebrews: Heb  
Revelation: Rev

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## **Joy & Inner Peace Can Be Elusive**

A hard concept for those contemplating following Jesus is the concept that one must die to self in order to start living with God now and forever. From God's personal Word to His people, the Bible, God is asking everyone to set aside personal pleasure and ambition and accept His individual assignments, which immediately bring inner peace and eventually great joy.

What I have found over the years is that many have difficulty in giving up present personal desires for a life of ongoing service in God's family even if that service leads to eternal life with God in Heaven and a more fulfilling life now. For many, it just seems really hard to accept such an offer from God because of the apparent lack of immediate gain. Even when we know that Heaven is secured by God due to His great power over everything, many want things their way now and are not willing to allow God to change their character to become more and more like His nor wait for the finalized New Heaven and Earth without sin, tears, or sorrow. In reality, many consider a present life of following Jesus too high a cost to give up present worldly pleasures and ambitions even if they obtain inner peace now and a perfected eternal life after physical death.

Jesus asks all to consider carefully the cost of following Him in order that no one start out on a journey that they are not willing to finish. He tells all who are considering following Him that they need to put aside personal ambition, commit their lives to helping others know God, and follow Him in a holy lifestyle wherever He might lead. He warns all that if we are not willing to do such, we will not become part of His eternal holy family. Although our personal investment of time, energy, and resources in and of themselves will not bring us into God's family and kingdom, God is pleased when we invest our lives in others.

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God is pleased with any and all good that we do, but He is also clear that any sin in our lives past, present, or future, will prevent us from spending eternity with Him (Rom 6:23) and that all have sinned (Rom 3:23). At first glance, this sounds bleak, but we should keep in mind that God has created all of us to be with Him forever. In reality, He values our choices and wants us to come to a place in our lives that we actually want to be with Him not for the things that He can give us or do for us as if He were some distant genie but because of who He is: God is love and cares deeply about everyone. God works on our behalf doing what is best for each (1 John 4:10–16; 2 Peter 3:9; cf. John 3:14–17; 1 Tim 2:4).

Knowing what it would take to grant us the freedom to choose to live with Him forever or to reject Him, our Heavenly Father worked out a plan with His only begotten Son, Jesus, to die for all (Acts 2:22–36; Rev 13:8). Knowing in advance that our freedom to choose was going to introduce sin into our lives, God made a way for those who learned to trust and obey Him to receive total sin removal through His Son's death making a close long-range relationship possible (Gal 3:13–14; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24; and Col 2:13–14).

In reality, those who listen to God receive from Him an immediate spiritual birth into His family that produces genuine inner peace, godly joy, illumination, and power. Through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we celebrate with God each person that we have the privilege and honor to lead to Him. Let's look further together to understand more fully what God is asking of each of us, and after looking, you decide whether or not you are already following Jesus according to God's will and criteria or wish to start now.

### **What We Were Taught Growing Up**

There is as good a chance that you like most were taught as a child to work hard, get a sound education, and make a place for yourself in the world. As a child, I was told that hard work coupled with a college education would insure a sound career from which I would be able to support a family, have enough money for some

leisure activities, and have enough to help our children get started on their life journeys. It all sounded good and seemed logical: work hard, learn a good profession, keep on working hard, and raise your family in peace and prosperity.

### What We Learn through Living

As we start maturing, most of us find that life is more complicated than what we had been told as a child. By my mid twenties, I had finished my military duty and undergraduate studies at college, and my wife and I were ready to raise our family and follow our career paths. While in college and through God's grace, I had built a relationship with a business owner that led to a business partnership as soon as I graduated. Life was good and matched most of what I had been taught as a child. I had worked hard and was now ready to settle down taking care of my family, continuing to work hard, going to church on Sunday, and seeking occasional times to relax with family and friends.

But, something started to happen along my life journey that probably happens to most people as they live out their adult lives. God persistently and consistently helped me to understand more accurately the finalized world that He is in the process of creating. As I studied His word and applied what He was teaching me, He helped me understand more fully His eternal plans for a perfect Heaven and a place of separation called Hell. I came to realize that being sent to Hell was not God's retribution for bad behavior but an alternative for those who did not want to be with Him forever. I become more and more aware of God's goodness and came to understand that even prior to the beginning of the physical creation, God had already made a way for everyone to be with Him in the completed perfect New Heaven, if they really wanted to be with Him. As I began to understand God's way of life and how good it is to follow Him, I started to want to please God and be more like Him.

This is the same for all. If we listen, God teaches us to become more and more concerned for the well being of all, and we begin weighing the good and evil around us against His eternal goodness. As we become closer to Him through a developing

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obedient interaction, we learn to start letting go of our childhood dreams and receive His much more fulfilling plans for our eternal lives.

I do not think that our initial childhood dreams and careers make much difference in deciding whether or not to receive God and His ways. Some of us may start off without any real aspirations but simply desire to take care of ourselves and our families, others may have high expectations of rewarding careers in an assortment of fields ranging from sports to medicine, and others may simply not care to engage in anything and may just start off drifting without any real direction. But, in all cases where we have not followed God closely from childhood, I believe there comes a time when each of us realizes that something is missing.

For me, within 5-6 years of successfully growing a company, I started to realize that success and a reasonable amount of money was not as personally satisfying as I had been led to believe. While I had been developing our new company, God had been developing me. I was becoming more and more concerned about others through regular exposure to His Word, the Bible, and through the leading of the Holy Spirit who encouraged me to minister to others including the homeless and those in prison. I started to realize that caring relationships with others were the only thing of eternal significance. Everything else was secondary.

As I listened to God, He developed within me a love for others that brought me great joy whenever I could help anyone grow in their relationship with Him. I realized that having a right relationship with God was the most important thing that anyone could have, and that all who start to listen to Christ had the great honor and privilege of representing God to the world. As time marched on, I realized that God was inviting me to limit my business activity and minister more to others. There came a point in life when I realized that God was asking me to let go of my childhood dreams and accept His good works planned out specifically for me. His plan for my life had been established before the universe was physically put in place. I just needed to follow His lead.

When I realized that I was at one of God's crossroads for my life, I knew that if I kept following my childhood dream, I probably would have the success that I anticipated, but I would not

be satisfied. If I wanted to experience true satisfaction, joy, and inner peace, I would need to trust God enough to turn fully onto His path for my life. Although I had recommitted my life to follow Jesus to the best of my ability at 28, it was not until I reached 37 that I was ready to close my business and take the next step in following Him. Over the following years, I have come to realize that following Jesus is a journey that provides constant godly growth as we learn to trust and obey Him more faithfully day by day.

### **God Encourages Us to Know Him Well**

If we learn to listen to God, many of us can give an account of how God helped us to move away from our personal dreams and paths to a much more fulfilling path that He has personally set up for us. If you have not done so yet, keep reading and consider allowing God to help you follow His path for you. Each of us are uniquely made in God's image according to His likeness, but due to being born into a fallen world with fallen natures, we all start off far from reaching our eternal potential. Part of the good news that God has for all is that if we start listening to Him, He will put us on a path that is both good and satisfying.

Over the next decade, God helped me to know Him and His Word more fully through graduate level Bible training and continual godly interaction with others. God worked in my life in such a way as to encourage my wife and I to move away from what we had been taught as children shifting our main focus from just taking care of ourselves and our family to helping others to know and follow Him. As He continued to train us through His Written Word and the leading of the Holy Spirit, God helped us to look beyond the immediate and include eternal concerns.

God helped me personally to experience great joy anytime that I was able to help others start listening to Him. I started helping others understand the importance of moving off the wide-road that leads to an eternal prison sentence. This wide road that all start off on and many remain on all of their lives leads to an eternal life of shame and suffering without God, but there is a second road less frequently traveled for those who choose to listen

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to God. This less traveled road can be exciting and leads to great godly joy and inner peace.

Although each of our lives are distinct, there are a couple points of common reference for all. Once we have been conceived, each of us is an eternal being. Secondly, God has a perfect plan for each of us that no one fully achieves but some follow more closely than others. Although God does not call most people into full time ministry, He calls *all* to minister to others. As we listen to God through the work of the Holy Spirit, God enlightens us so that we begin to know reality. As we follow God's lead and introduce Him to others, we are encouraged, empowered, and experience excitement, joy, and inner peace.

Reading this book and studying the biblical principles within should bring more overall clarity to this part of your eternal journey prior to physical death. Let us consider together how God created us to be part of His volunteer close-knit holy eternal family and what that means within an eternal perspective. Satan continually distracts and deceives as many as possible so that they will not take time to listen to God and begin to understand how much God loves everyone and wants the best for all. When someone listens to God and decides that He is worthy to follow, they are born of God and start undergoing a transformation that makes them morally more and more like Christ. They become an effective part of God's rescue operation helping others see past Satan's deceptions.

The only people who will be with God in the New Heaven and Earth are those who choose to be part of His holy family having come to realize that having a relationship with our loving Creator is much better than having it our own way. In reality, what one has to give up in order to follow Jesus is elusive and temporary, but what is gained has real everlasting value starting in the here and now. As a minister I am reminded every time that I speak at a funeral, that the soul of each dead person is in one of two places: he or she is either with God or in a jail called Sheol, Hades, waiting to stand trial before God and then be sent to an isolated place away from the New Heaven called Hell with no chance to ever leave. It cannot get any worse than that.

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## The Big Picture: The Outcome of the Creation

Have you ever had quiet moments when God seemed so close that you were overwhelmed with joy? Have you come to a place in life that you are experiencing God's love, joy, and inner peace on an ongoing basis? If not, it may be that you have been too busy and have continually rejected God's invitation to become part of His eternal family. If Satan can keep people busy and reduce or eliminate their reflection on God and His great love for all, he is accomplishing much in his fight against God. As you read on, let's take time together to reflect on God, His goodness, and His desire for all of us to come to the place of receiving Him according to His loving righteous way of life, which leads to eternal life with Him. God will never force anyone to return His love but desires that all do so.

As we reflect on God and His desired outcome for all, we notice at least four key points: (1) God initially created man in His own image according to His own likeness (Gen 1:26–27) in a sinless *earthly* state (Gen 2:7); (2) God gave humanity a fairly large amount of free-will in order to have a close *mutual* relationship with as many as would come to desire the same; (3) God knew prior to the initial physical part of the creation that all humanity would be cloaked in sin through Adam and Eve's initial sin, and therefore, all of the initial creation would enter a corrupted state (Rev 13:8; Rom 8:18–22); and (4) God knew that He alone had the ability not only to restore those who learned to return His love to a sinless state but through His own death raise them to a higher state, a *resurrected* state. This state shares qualities both of flesh and spirit, which is the same as Jesus' final state (Phil 3:20–21). This Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son, who created the whole material universe under His Father's direction (Heb 1:1–2; John 1:1–3; Col 1:13–20).

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Desiring a mutually loving relationship, God's final outcome of the Creation allows God's family to live with Him forever in a very close relationship in His sinless New Heaven and New Earth with no more pain and sorrow (Rev 21:1–4; 2 Peter 3:10–11; cf. Dan 12:1–2; Matt 25:34, 46). Those who reject God's love and/or lordship have to wait in a holding place similar to jail called Sheol/Hades (Luke 16:19–31; Rev 20:13) and eventually stand trial and be condemned to live eternally isolated from God in an isolated place of eternal shame and suffering called the Lake of Fire and/or Hell (Rev 20:11–15; Dan 12:1–2; Matt 25:41, 45–46).

### **The Creation Is Moving toward Its Final Form**

This is God's creation, and He knows what He is doing! God is awesome! Not only is He sovereign, He is not limited by time nor does He make mistakes. When God looked at the start of the Creation, He said that it was “good exceedingly [Gen 1:31].” From the beginning of the Creation, He knew how each of us would respond to His love and lordship and how He would save all who would learn to return His love (Eph 1:3–8; 1 Peter 1:1–2; Rom 8:28–30).

When we consider God's end goal, the final outcome of His creation, we come to realize that His creation is not over until He has separated those who will learn to trust and obey Him from those who will not from every generation and nation. God places those individuals from all ages who learn to listen to Him into His holy eternal family providing a sinless place to live.

Considering that God had everything planned out before He physically created humanity and the universe, what is His part past the initial seven days of creation? Before we reflect on some of the details, let's consider a critical point. Although God asked humanity to take care of one another and life in general (Gen 1:26–28), it is God—not us—who has been doing the heavy lifting throughout the entire creation process. It is God who has made a way through the death of His Son to purify all, and it is God who constantly holds the creation together and interacts with all to bring as many as will receive Him into His eternal Kingdom (Rev 3:20; Col 1:13–20).

God, who is not limited by time, knew in advance what it would take to create a free-willed close-knit holy family. He knew ahead of time who throughout the whole creation would want to become part of His eternal loving family; they are the ones who are “called” by God (Rom 8:28; Eph 1:3–5; 1 Peter 1:1–5). He also knew in advance that He would need to die for all humanity (John 3:14–15; Acts 2:22–36; Rev 13:8) in order to bring those who would learn to love Him into a final eternal perfected resurrected state.

So, prior to starting the physical creation, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit planned out a death within the Trinity (Tri-unity) in which they would suffer tremendously as the Son was separated from the Father (spiritual death) when He died on behalf of all for all time (Heb 10:10-14). For those who would learn to trust and obey God, Jesus would remove their sin and absorb it in His own body in order to eliminate it forever (Gal 3:13–14; 1 Peter 2:24; 2 Cor 5:21; Col 2:13–14). Although it is not possible for us, it would be as if someone could remove cancer from someone else by absorbing their bad cells and replacing them with healthy cells and then dying due to the cancer now ravaging his or her own body.

Beyond the initial six days of the creation and the seventh day of rest, God has not only died for all at just the right time (Gal 4:4), but He has also been interacting within the hearts and minds of everyone encouraging all to reject evil and to do good. God makes sure that no matter what circumstance one is born into, everyone will understand that He desires all to be part of His family and live holy lives (2 Peter 3:9; 1 Tim 2:4). Although everyone is born into sin under the many deceptions of Satan, all have a chance to overcome evil as God teaches everyone the reality of His creation and His requirements for eternal life, which eventually brings some to the point of wanting to do His will and follow His holy ways (Rom 2:11–16; Matt 12:50; 1 John 2:17).

### **Receiving God according to His Terms**

Knowing that God wants everyone to learn to return His love (John 3:16; 2 Peter 3:9), why do so many stay on the wide-

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road that leads to destruction (Matt 7:13–14) instead of receiving God into their lives? With God doing so much for everyone, it would seem that most would get off the road leading to destruction and follow God's path for their lives. But in reality, an elevated sense of self worth, pride, along with Satan's encouragement to rebel continually against God keeps many content to follow their own desires instead of God's. With the many distractions of general life, if we ignore God speaking to our hearts, we will fail to know Him and love Him for who He is. He is a loving caring Creator. Our first obligation is to learn to love God back. He is constantly working with us and worthy of our love (Deut 30:19–20; Matt 22:36–37; 1 John 4:16). Secondly, if we want to be with God, we must allow God to break through our personal activity and Satan's deceptions and teach us to love others on the same level that we love ourselves and our families (Matt 22:39; John 13:34).

It was not long after the seven day start of the Creation that Satan called God a liar regarding death through disobedience and tempted Eve and Adam to sin against God resulting in their immediate separation from God (Gen 3:1–6, 24). This was the start of our present fallen world. Everyone starts with a corrupted nature due to Adam and Eve's initial sin and additional sins committed over hundreds and hundreds of years by those who have gone before us. Then, we add the consequences of our personal sins to the mix. This baggage is shared by and affects all humanity. But, as we look at the world and our fallen nature and compare it to the purity of our loving Creator, some of us have come to a point in our lives that we want a change. We want a pure godly life and, therefore, we have called out for a savior (Isa 6:1–8; Acts 4:12; Gal 3:24).

What really complicates matters is not only the fact that all are born into sin, but, in reality, we are all born into an ongoing war initiated by Satan against God (Matt 11:12; 1 Peter 5:8–11; Rev 12:7–11). God could have locked Satan up at any time even prior to or during the Creation, and eventually, He will do just that (Rev 20:10). But, it appears that God allows Satan to remain in our presence to tempt us to rebel against Him in order to force us to think about our own fallen nature, His goodness, and the future New Heaven and Earth.

What we sometimes forget is that God's Anointed Messiah, Jesus, did not come to bring peace to the whole world but instead to divide it between those who are willing to follow God and those who are not (Matt 10:34–39; Luke 12:49–53). Although we do not presently have world peace, let's thank God that Jesus came to bring eternal peace to all who learn to listen to God as He reconciles them to Himself (Eph 2:14–16; cf. John 16:33).

God has a continuous open door policy for all who voluntarily submit to His lordship forgiving our sin and reconciling us into His eternal family. God forces everyone to consider carefully what we personally want out of our eternal lives because once one is physically born, he or she lives forever either with or without Him. This is why Satan works so hard to keep all people busy whether just surviving the wars going on around them, simply going to work day after day, and/or seeking some forms of personal pleasure. If Satan can keep people busy through ongoing activity, he is keeping many from taking the time to reflect properly on eternal reality, which God places in everyone's conscience.

So, as we continue to reflect on God and His goodness, we come to realize that He expects us to listen to Him because He is our Creator Father, who loves us beyond measure and constantly works on our behalf. Everything that He wants to teach us is for our personal and collective good. God teaches us that true joy and inner peace come from dying to our self-centered aspirations and joining Him in serving one another (Luke 9:23; 14:26-27, 33; etc.). Being part of God's eternal close-knit holy family brings about a foundational level of joy and inner peace that cannot be duplicated by any perversion of God's lifestyle or will for our lives. Jesus wants our joy to be full, which can only be accomplished by following Him and carrying one's individual cross (John 17:13; Heb 12:1–2; Col 1:24). As we allow God to transform us, the Holy Spirit develops our character to be more and more like His character full of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22–23).



### God's Eternal Close-knit Holy Family

As we read at the beginning of the Bible how God created the heavens and earth out of nothing, it should produce within each of us an awe of God. God is great and the heavens are declaring His glory (Ps 19:1). As we continue to read looking beyond the creation of the physical universe, we should be filled with a sense of joy as we realize that God has created all of us to be part of His eternal family.

After God had created all of the animals according to their own individual kinds (species: Gen 1:24–25), He created humanity in His own image according to the likeness of His own nature (Gen 1:26–27; cf. 3:22; Acts 17:22–34; James 3:9). Although our nature has been corrupted through disobedience starting with Eve and then Adam, God grants everyone the freedom to make choices about contemporary and eternal relationships. Knowing that this high degree of freedom would result in disobedience and *temporary* separation for *all* from Him, God still chose this path for us and was willing to die for us calling the overall outcome of the creation *tov meod*, “good exceedingly” (Gen 1:31).

He is a loving kind creator (1 John 4:16; cf. Exod 33:18–19; 34:6–7), and He has made a way to remove all that is bad (evil/corrupt) from His obedient children making them suitable for His eternal family (Col 2:13–14). For those who allow Him to lead and shape their lives, at the point of physical death or at the Rapture (1 Thess 4:15–17), He finishes perfecting each in holiness according to His moral image maintaining their unique attributes.

### Being Born a Second Time

It is clear from Jesus' teaching to Nicodemus that it is critical that one be born a second time. If one is to see and enter

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Heaven, one must be born a second time—this time into God’s holy family (John 3:1–8). Jesus had taught His disciples that no individual could be born spiritually into God’s family through the will and/or action of man, but solely through God’s will and action (John 1:12–13). When Jesus told Nicodemus that God loves all people so much that He sent His Son, who helped Him with the Creation, to die on a wooden cross for their salvation, He was telling Nicodemus that God’s love is different than the love of the World.

Although God’s children were in direct rebellion against Him ( John 1:10–11; 3:19–20; 15:18–19), He still provided a way of peace and joy for them (Rom 5:6–10). His creation was rebelling against His peaceful plan for their lives and thereby transgressing Him and one another. But, that did not stop God from loving the World and making a way for all who would learn to trust and obey Him to be born anew into His eternal holy family being justified by the redeeming death of His Son. When Christ entered the world through the power of the Holy Spirit becoming incarnate as a baby in Mary’s womb, He came to show us how to live holy lives proclaiming God’s love, and then He died on a cross on our behalf.

As we start responding to God’s illuminating work in our lives, God shows us more and more of His nature and desired life style. The more that we listen to God and do His will, the more we know Him and desire to do even more of His will. As the Holy Spirit makes us all aware of our shortcomings in light of God’s holy nature, each of us must come to a place where we are willing to admit that we possess a fallen corrupted nature and allow God to start transforming our lives. If we do not, we will never start experiencing firsthand the love, joy, and inner peace that come through following Him and living according to His holy lifestyle.

### **One Is a Lonely Number**

When speaking of solitary individuals, “one” is a lonely number and that reality is valid even for God. In spite of the many forms of life created at the beginning of the Creation, God said that it was not good for Adam to be without a suitable mate, and

therefore, He made a mate for Adam whom he could relate to and share his life (Gen 2:18). Similarly, we see our Heavenly Father working with His beloved Son creating a people in their own image (*be-tsalmē-nu*; “in our image”) according to their own likeness (*ki-demutē-nu*, “according to our likeness”) (Gen 1:26–27),<sup>1</sup> who would be suitable eternal companions for Jesus (Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 1:9; Col 1:16). A people whom the Father and Son could relate to, share their lives, and join them in their good works. They are asking all people to join them in a mature serving relationship (Matt 12:50; Rev 3:20–21; 21:3), which in turn provides great joy and inner peace. Having a godly relationship with God and others produces good works (Eph 2:10; Titus 2:14).

During everyone's earthly life, God lives closely with *all* as loving parents often do watching over their children carefully (Matt 23:37; Luke 13:34.) Yet, He cannot fully share His life with us until we mature. Similarly as adults, we cannot live on the same level of intimacy with our young children as we can with some of our adult children and mature close friends. To make a close, mature, and eternal relationship possible, our Heavenly Father is at work in a special way developing those who listen. As we submit to God's leading and holy way of life, He develops us daily encouraging us to join Him in His good works waiting for the time that He will bring us into His eternal presence.

In a somewhat similar manner, we patiently work with our children as they are developing, waiting for the day that we may obtain a close mature relationship with them as adults. The major difference is that we are happy if our children's sin is reduced when they mature, but God insists on total sin removal. God promises all who follow His leading that He will *totally transform* their moral character to be like Christ's and through the miracle of the Cross they will enter into Heaven *without any* sin. What a miracle! Because of Jesus' atoning death, those who listen to God will enter into His eternal presence without sin and clothed in His righteousness (2 Cor 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24; Rom 8:28–30; 1 John 3:1–2).

### God's Desired Intimacy

Does God seem too distant, righteous, and glorious to want a close relationship with you? Because of our sin, it is easy for all of us to consider a distant relationship with God, but to think that God might actually want to live with us in a close relationship just seems illogical in our present sinful rebellious state. It seems that if we get too close to God, our sin will tarnish His reputation and glory. But, just the opposite is true: God's willingness to work with us in our sinful hostile state shows His true nature of pure love that is demonstrated through His justice tempered with grace (Rom 5:8–10). In fact, as Jesus ministered on earth, it was common for Him to associate with known sinners. Because of His willingness to associate with flagrant sinners, His reputation seemed to have been tarnished by some who did not understand how godly love works to lift all (Matt 9:9–13; 11:18–19; cf. Luke 15:32). But, in the end, God's glorious nature will be clearly seen by everyone (Rev 22:5; Phil 2:5–11; 3:20–21).

### God Wants Us to Want to Please Him

One day when Jesus was teaching about the Kingdom of God, someone came to Him and told Him that His mother and brothers were outside and wanted to speak to Him. This became an opportune time to teach those around Him about the closeness of God's eternal holy family. Jesus asked the one who had made the request on behalf of His biological family who His mother and brothers were. He then proceeded to answer His own question by stretching out His hand toward His disciples and saying, "Behold, my mother and my brothers! *For whoever will do **the will of my Father in Heaven**, he is my brother and sister and mother* [Matt 12:49b–50; cf. Luke 8:19–21]."

With this teaching, Jesus wanted those who were present and all future disciples to reconsider the idea of family. Although our biological families are normally closer than any other earthly relationships, Christ's followers are in reality closer to God and one another than any biological relationship. Yes, we all have a

God-given responsibility to take care of our immediate family members (1 Tim 5:8), but Jesus is teaching all who listen that His Heavenly Father is the head of all and that His followers comprise a very close-knit holy family that is closer than relatives through blood lines. Jesus is so close to each of His followers that whenever someone does something good or bad toward any, they are also doing it directly for or against Him (Matt 25:31–46).

### **Eternal Brothers**

This close-knit family unity is far superior to even the best family unity on earth due to our present fallen nature. There is also one major difference. On earth, there are millions of small family units. This is not so in heaven. There is one God and Father of all and one Family of God (Eph 4:6; 2:19–22). Jesus said that in heaven there would be no marriages, but instead, His children would be like the angels in this regard (Matt 22:30; Luke 20:35–36). As one studies God's Word looking toward Heaven, one notes that there are many references to brothers but not brothers *and* sisters. This is because there is no longer a need to reproduce. God's eternal family will be complete. The earthly function of creating additional children through small family units ceases. Everyone—whether male or female on earth—who learns to trust and obey God will be perfectly completed and reconciled positionally to God as one of His sons (Matt 5:9; Luke 20:35–36; John 20:17; Rom 8:14, 19; Gal 3:26–28).

### **Free-Will**

Although He wants a close relationship with all, God does not force anyone to be part of His eternal family. He continually works with all to bring as many as possible to a place of understanding, a place where individuals start to understand their ongoing personal sin and have a desire to turn to Him for a better way of life (2 Peter 3:9). When our Heavenly Father sent Jesus to live among us, He provided us all with an example of His love in action ( John 15:13, Phil 2:1–11; Heb 1:3; 7:25). After Jesus' death

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on the Cross, He also became our one and only *access* to the Father (John 10:9; 14:6; Eph 2:13–18). If we learn to return God’s love, we will also learn to love one another (1 John 4:12, 19).

Free-will plays a strong role in God’s desire for fellowship with us. God will bless both now and in the future all who listen to Him ( Deut 30:15–20; Mal 3:8–10; Rom 6:22–23). Although God desires and strongly encourages all people to join His eternal close-knit holy family, He does not force anyone to do so. But, beware, a large amount of freedom does not give anyone a license to do whatever he or she wants without eventually costing everything that is worth anything ( Matt 25:45–46; 1 John 3:14–18; Rev 21:7–8). God is sovereign. He has the final say.

If we do not allow God to develop us into good social beings and remove our sin, He separates us from Himself and His obedient children for ever. If we do not listen to God and join Him in shedding light on His great work—*the initialization of the Creation . . . to the Cross . . . to the Consummation of the Creation in Heaven* with its perfect fellowship—we will not ever become part of His eternal family. Instead we will end up isolated from God and His family in a place called “Hell.” The penalty for transgressing God and fellow man is death, eternal separation from God. Any remnant of sin in anyone’s life would take away from *perfect unity* in Heaven. God will not allow any divisions in heaven.

*Give-and-take relationships based upon social family equality require free-will within the family.* Until an individual allows God to teach him or her the nature of godly love in order to be a functioning social being within God’s family (John 13:34; 15:9, 12), he or she will continue in a self-centered lifestyle. Everyone who starts to listen to God starts growing in godly love. From the moment that someone truly commits to following Jesus, he or she becomes a new creation reconciled to God and the rest of His close-knit eternal holy family forever both *legally* and *socially*.

### **Adoption: Our Legal Status as Sons of God**

He came unto His own, and His own did not receive Him. *But, as many as did receive Him, He gave to*

*them authority to be children of God*, to those who were believing/trusting in His name. John 1:11–12

The Apostle John's first point made in this Scripture is that the majority of people in general rejected and continue to reject Jesus Christ's presence in their lives as both lord and savior. John's second point is that *Jesus officially makes those who receive Him as lord and savior legal children of God*.

Paul, a skilled lawyer of God's laws, who lived in a world of Hebrew, Greek, and Roman culture and thought, used similar Greek terminology stating that Christ's followers have the same legal rights as Christ Himself. This is an important concept. In the first century Greco-Roman world, if you had legal status as a son through adoption, you had all the legal rights of a biological son.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul stated that Christ's followers were children of God and *fellow heirs with Christ*, who would eventually be glorified with Him. They were eagerly waiting for the realization of their *huiiothesia*, "adoption as a son," and the redemption of their bodies, their purification from sin (Rom 8:15–17, 23). In his letter to the Galatians, Paul stated that those who are chosen by God are received into His eternal family through *huiiothesia*, "adoption as a son [Gal 4:4–6]." In Ephesians, Paul stated that prior to the physical implementation of the creation according to God's kindness, He predestined each of those whom He called to *huiiothesia*, "adoption as a son," through Jesus Christ (Eph 1:3–6; 2:4–7).

Although Paul used adoption language in many of his letters, when discussing Jesus' relationship with His followers in a key passage regarding the sanctification, justification, and glorification of Christ's followers (Romans 8: 28–30), he used a common Greek term of his day, *adelphois*, to express the idea that Jesus' followers were also His "brothers." During Jesus' ascension from Hades (His resurrection), He told Mary Magdalene to go to His "brothers" and tell them that He was ascending to His Father, who was also their Father, and His God, who was also their God (John 20:17).

### Oneness: Our Relational Status as God's Children

Jesus praying, “And the *glory (doxan)* that you have given to me, *I have given to them in order that they may be one (hen) just as we are one*; I in them and you in me in order that they may be made complete into one with the result that the world may know that you sent me and that you love them just as you love me.” John 17:22–23; cf. John 14:19–21

As stated above, part of Jesus' prayer—prior to His arrest and crucifixion the next day—gives us the clearest meaning of what our relationship will be like with God as His children. It reveals God's inner thoughts regarding the close-knit nature of His growing eternal holy family and His great love for all. If this thought seems foreign, talk to God and ask for His help in understanding this prayer and its truth regarding His desired close-knit holy relationship with all of His loving and obedient children.

This part of Jesus' prayer gives us the clearest understanding of what our relationship will be like with God as His children. Jesus said that those who obey Him are both His brothers and friends (Mark 3:35; John 15:14). Jesus also taught His followers that *if someone did not have any desire to do God's will, they would never really understand who God is and what He has done through His son Jesus Christ* (John 7:17; 8:47). In fact, it is only those who actually have a desire to do God's will and allow Him to mold and shape them in a godly way who will end up in His holy family (Matt 7:21). ***Following Jesus is a radically transforming experience.***

When Jesus prayed that all people of all time who believe (trust) in Him may be “one,” united with God and one another, He illuminates what it means to be saved and have eternal life with God. Jesus is praying for all who learn to trust and obey Him out of love to be united in the same special way to His Heavenly Father as He is. When we look to God's Word for a better understanding of “oneness (unity),” we are reminded that God said, “Let us make Adam in *our* image according to *our* likeness.” The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit's unity is so close that Israel

considered their God, which was written in the plural form, “our gods,” as *ahad*, “one” entity, one God. Jesus was praying that all who ever learn to love, trust, and obey God would have the same close unity that He had with the Father, which includes being loved by the Father just as He is (John 17:20–23).

### Jesus Shares His Glory

What is this unity that Jesus desires for all who learn to trust and obey Him? Jesus shares His glory with all who learn to love the Father and Him so that they may be united in the same way to the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, and one another as He is united to the Father. ***John 17:22–23 unlocks the door to our understanding of all other Scripture and gives us tremendous insight into our identity as children of God through Jesus Christ.***

Through His prayer, we see Jesus asking that His disciples be protected under His Father’s name thereby showing that His followers are *an intimate part of God’s eternal holy family* (John 17:11b). In addition to this request, Jesus declared a powerful truth to encourage all who were trusting God throughout all time by illuminating the truth of their present and future relationship with God and one another.

As we look at John 17:22, we see ***Jesus sharing His glory (doxan)*** and thereby allowing us to come into His Father’s household ***with the same unity that He has always had with His Father.*** With the Holy Spirit, they share an intimate godly unity under a single family structure (cf. Eph 2:19). Jesus has provided a way for His faithful brothers and sisters on earth to be fully reconciled as His eternal brothers.

The glory that Jesus is sharing with His followers stems from His relationship with the Father and His resulting character. Jesus is like His Father, who is full of grace and truth. Jesus’ glory as described in John 1:14 is similar to the Father’s glory described in Exodus 33:18–19 and 34:6. Jesus’ nature is identical to His Father’s, who is full of grace and truth (John 17:5; cf. John 14:9; Heb 1:3). It is Jesus’ sonship ***and*** loving character that comprise His glory and attracts individuals to Him much more than His beauty or power. His caring nature attracts some to Him as

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multicolored spectrums radiating from a diamond in bright sunlight might attract some.

God did not create anyone or anything *for* His glory. God's glory is based on His eternal glorious nature and *is demonstrated* through His creation. His total character, which includes His attributes of strength, justice, and love, contributes to His glory. Because of His nature, God is glorious! In Isaiah 43:7, the prophet Isaiah said that the way that God works with those who are called by His name and whom He has continually worked with, manifests His glory. Isaiah went on to say that those who are called by His name are His witnesses to the whole world telling others about YHWH's (Jehovah's) faithfulness, which contributes to His glory (Isa 43:10).

The very nature of Jesus' glory is easy to miss if we think only in terms of power. A major clue to the specific meaning of what Jesus prayed to His Father can be deduced from the fact that He is sharing His glory with *all* who follow Him of all ages with the result *that its quality enables perfect unity*. Gifts of the Spirit such as power, wisdom, knowledge, miracles, healing, proclamation, prophecy, and tongues would not in and of themselves help us form a perfect union and are not shared equally with all Christ's followers (Acts 1:8; 1 Cor 12–13).

The glory that Jesus is sharing with *all* of His disciples *enables* them to live in perfect holy unity with God and one another just as Jesus already lives in perfect unity with His Heavenly Father. Therefore, when Jesus said, "I have given them the glory that you have given me *in order that they may be one as we are one* [John 17:22]," we come to realize that He gave up His *exclusive* position as the Father's *only* son. Jesus is sharing His sonship *and* His Father's nature of grace and truth with His followers. We recognize that the very essence of Jesus' glory, which He shares with all Believers (Rom 8:17; 1 Peter 5:10), is derived from His Father's nature.<sup>2</sup>

As we consider the fact that Jesus is sharing His character and position as the *only* son of the Creator with all who trust and obey God, imagine how that would have sounded to the people of the first century as they considered how much more important it would be to be the son of the Most High in comparison even to being the only son of their greatest leader, the Roman Emperor.

If you lived in the first-century Mediterranean world and the Emperor had only one son, you would have had a great respect for him knowing both his present and future political positions. It brought great joy to all who were listening in the first century when they heard that Jesus Christ, the only son of the Most High, had given up His exclusive right of sonship and shared it along with His grace and truth with all who were following Him. By sharing His sonship with all who trusted God, Jesus had made a way for all of God's obedient children to have perfect unity with God and one another. What a wonderful part of the Gospel Message!

### The Meaning of "One"

In the Hebrew world of the Old Testament and in Jesus' day, *ahad*, "one" could mean a single entity, or a group of two or more operating as a single entity. After God created Adam and Eve as male and female, we see Him saying that they will work together in a close godly unity that we call "marriage" expressed through the Hebrew language as *lebasar ahad*, "as one flesh" (Gen 2:24). In both the Greek Septuagint and New Testament Greek (e.g. Matt 19:5), the Hebrew is translated as *sarka mian*, "one flesh." The Septuagint is a third-fourth century B.C. translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek.

God is stating that when a man and woman commit to each other in a godly union, they are committing to work together as a close godly team versus working together as two independent beings. They work together as "one flesh/one entity" with genuine concern and overall love for each other. At other times, God shows that when Israel was attacked by others, they came out as "one man" (*ish ahad*) to overcome adversity and wrong doing (Judges 20:1, 8, 11; 1 Sam 11:7). This was translated in the Greek Septuagint as *anēr heis*, "one man." The men came out as a godly close-knit team working together to overcome their common enemies. Also consider *ahad 'am*, "one people," (Gen 34:16). The Septuagint shows that the Hebrew word *ahad*, "one," was translated consistently using various forms of the Greek word *heis*, *mia*, *hen*, "one."

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As the Apostle John wrote to Gentiles in the common Greek of his day, it helps us understand Jesus' prayer for godly unity among His followers. We take note that John used the same Greek wording of the Septuagint corresponding to the Hebrew idea of *ahad*, "one/oneness." This helps us to understand that Jesus prayed for us to share in the same godly unity that He always had with His Heavenly Father and would again share with Him after His Father raised Him from dead (Acts 2:22–36).

As John shared Jesus' prayer with others, those listening would understand that Jesus' death on a cross and the sharing of His glory would result in a godly unity for His followers that matched Jesus' unity with the Father. Through Jesus' prayer recorded in John 17, we have a clear understanding of how close we will be to God and one another in the New Heaven. Through this same prayer, God's obedient children should also understand that they should experience some of this godly unity on this side of eternity; this will provide a great witness helping the lost World to understand that God sent Jesus to die for all and loves His obedient children in the same way that He loves Jesus (John 17: 21, 23).

### The Father Has No Favorites

There is neither Jew nor Greek;  
there is neither slave nor freeman;  
and there is not male *and* female;  
because *all of you are one*  
*through Christ Jesus.* Gal 3:28

The relationship that exists between the Father and every true follower of Christ is that of a loving Father and an obedient, *only* son. Normally, an only son in good standing receives favor and full inheritance from his father. Regarding being loved as a child, our heavenly Father treats all of His *obedient* children equally as if each one were His only son; *God does not have favorites* (James 2:1–5). God has created each individual uniquely different emotionally and physically including such attributes as eye, hair, and skin color. *He has created everyone different, yet He wants all to work together in great unity.* God's unbiased love

encourages us to love all people equally (Rom 2:11–12; 1 Peter 1:17).

The moment that we fully receive Jesus Christ into our lives as our *savior* and *lord*—which means turning our lives over *completely* to the potter so that He can finish the good work that He started in us—we begin to realize our Father-only-Son relationship. Once we are born from above, it is a done deal (John 5:24). Even in our present state of sin, we become our Father's justified children who are learning to be more and more like Christ, who eventually will be completed in Christ's likeness (Rom 8:28–30; Phil 3:20–21). God tells us that when we have been born of the Spirit, He places part of Himself in us, His Seed, which is the Holy Spirit ( Eph 1:13–14). When we submit to God and His way, He begets us spiritually into His family and we can no longer continually . . . continually . . . continually sin (1 John 3:9).

As soon as the Holy Spirit unites with us, we become part of God's eternal intimate holy family and our increasingly greater walk within God's eternal plan allows the World to see God working in us. Where Jesus is, the Father is (John 8:28–29). The unity between the Father and the Son is so close that if you know one of them, you have seen both (John 14:7–11). Where Christ's followers are, Jesus and the Father are (John 14:23; Matt 25:40; Acts 9:4). Jesus introduces us to a third individual who is united perfectly to the Father and Him, the Spirit of Truth. If you have seen Jesus, you have seen the Father. If the Spirit of Truth lives in you, the Father and Jesus live in you (John 14:16–26).

The world continues to hear the Gospel from the Father and the Son through Jesus' obedient followers who are assisted by the Spirit of Truth, who is dwelling in them ( John 13:20; 17:18). The Father and the Son working together in perfect unity have sent the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit, to comfort and guide all of Christ's followers similarly to the way that the Father sent the Holy Spirit to help Jesus during His earthly ministry (Matt 3:16–17). *When Jesus asked the Father to give His disciples a comforter to replace His physical presence* (John 14:16–17; 16:13), *He was making this special Father-only-Son relationship **immediately** possible for all of His disciples through the indwelling and empowering of the Holy Spirit* (Acts 1:8).

### Early Church Understanding

How did the Early Church receive Emmanuel, “God with us” and the closeness that God desires? Satan has been at work from the beginning of the Creation to keep as many people as possible from drawing close to God. But, he works even harder against those who start paying attention to God’s invitation into an eternal close holy relationship with Him. In his studies, Constantine Scouteris discovered that the Early Church Fathers had a sound understanding of God’s desired closeness through the apostles teachings on Christ.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding Jesus' prayer for unity among Believers, Scouteris stated that the New Testament presents Christ’s followers with the possibility of realizing that *Christ’s communion removes in the most radical way any worldly communion*. Christ’s communion is the creation of a new relationship, a relationship involving God and Christ’s disciples. He went on to say that John 17 has two major themes:

- (1) the godly unity desired by Christ for His followers is not only for His immediate disciples but also for all future disciples who will learn to trust Christ through the apostolic preaching; and
- (2) all disciples participate in Christ’s divine glory.

Scouteris wrote that these two points became a solid foundation for understanding God and His desired unity.<sup>4</sup>

From Ignatius’ letter to the Philadelphians around A.D. 107, Scouteris stated that a radical change had occurred after Christ’s ascension for God’s children: their focus had moved from a subject-object relationship to one of *participation* with God.<sup>5</sup> God had made a way through Christ’s atoning death for a closer relationship. When one looks at Origen’s (A.D. 185–254) work titled *De Principiis*, one observes Origen teaching both a future perfection into a divine likeness and unity that Jesus had prayed for (3.6.1) and a present practical unity that expresses itself in Christ’s followers being like minded in godly unity (1.6.2).

In light of our early Greek Fathers, Scouteris sees God the Father as an accessible divine person who generates the Son and causes the Holy Spirit to go forth establishing an unique unity within the Father's kingdom. The Father has given of His divine essence to the Son and Holy Spirit and in return they respond in freedom and love with absolute obedience to the Father's will.<sup>6</sup> He went on to say that the Early Church Fathers could now promote unity of God's people through the unifying force of Christ. In the person of Christ, all distinctions and divisions were and are abolished.<sup>7</sup>

Scouteris went on to discuss Gregory of Nyssa's (A.D. 330–95) teachings regarding the divided nature of each individual due to sin derived from self-centeredness. This divided nature due to sin deprived mankind of any possibility of living in godly fellowship with God or others. But, Christ's self-sacrifice has the potential of reestablishing God's original desired harmony bringing those who listen back into a perfect unity with Him and others.<sup>8</sup> By becoming a real individual with a concrete human nature, Christ, who was of the same nature as our Heavenly Father, took on the nature of humanity and transferred godly unity to the human level enabling the unity that Jesus prayed for all of His followers.<sup>9</sup>

C. H. Dodd having studied the terminology of being "in the Father" and being "in Christ" from a first-century Mediterranean perspective, came to the conclusion that individuals living in the first century would have understood this type of wording to denote a unity that transcends human unity, a close godly unity.<sup>10</sup> He said that Jesus' prayer shows a completed picture of unity for the Father, Son, and the Son's followers with love being the key. ***It is love*** that leads Jesus' disciples to obey His commands just as He obeys His heavenly father's commands out of love for Him.<sup>11</sup> The idea of "God in us" represents the most intimate union conceivable between God and men.<sup>12</sup>

### God's Grace Is Hard To Believe

The Gospel is a message that brings *such good news* that many are afraid that it cannot possibly be true. But, it is true, and it

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is *never too late* to receive Jesus Christ as your personal savior and lord. When we make a conscious heart-felt acknowledgment of repentance of our sins and receive Jesus Christ as savior and lord, we are *immediately reconciled* to God as His sons with the same inheritance as Jesus Christ. God receives *all* who follow Jesus as His eternal children *with all the rights of an only child, a son*. Those who follow Jesus are not reconciled as the Most High's servants (Gal 4:7). In fact, Jesus not only calls His followers "brothers" but also "friends" (John 15:12–15).

Are you getting a little nervous because God is calling as many as will listen into His close-knit holy family? Being part of God's intimate eternal holy family places one into a mutually close relationship with the Father. It sounded like heresy to Israel's religious leaders in the first-century when Jesus told them that He was God's son, because by proclaiming to be His Heavenly Father's son, He was proclaiming to be a member of God's immediate family. He had made Himself equal in family membership to the Father ( John 5:18).

The religious leaders considered our Heavenly Father a father in name only (John 8:41). They knew that Jesus was saying that God was his literal heavenly father. Later the same religious leaders following Satan's lead said that Caesar was their only king (John 19:15). Jesus is literally God's son and that makes Him equal in relational stature although not in authority to God the Father. Those who follow Jesus also become literal sons of God, and therefore, become equal to the Father in relational stature as family members *under* His authority (John 10:34–36; 20:17). As stated above, there will be a day when we will meet our Creator face-to-face and begin a full mature relationship with Him and all other individuals who follow Jesus Christ.

Does it look like the deeper we dig, the more we have taken away from God's glory by our up-and-coming mature and intimate relationship with Him? No, the deeper we look, the more we realize how gracious our Heavenly Father is in making us equal family members with Jesus and Himself. Knowing that we are far from perfect makes it very difficult to accept this pure love-relationship with Him. God's planned and perfect holy mutual relationship leaves *nothing to separate us from Him* in the future

when all sin is removed from our individual lives and we stand before Him clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

Most of us are intimidated easily and would have a hard time even communicating with some national figure much less with the Most High. Yet it is true, God is calling all who listen to Him into a pure, mature relationship with Him and one another because of our current ongoing close relationship with Jesus Christ, our eldest brother (Rom 5:1–5; 1 John 2:28).

Jesus said that He wants His followers to be “one” with the Father and Him just as He is “one” with the Father. When we begin to understand that the main purpose of the Creation through the Cross is to create an eternal close-knit holy family for the Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and one another, we should receive God into our lives and submit to His lordship. We along with our other family members will eternally love, praise, and obey the Father and Son.

On the New Earth and in the New Heaven, Christ's followers will have already gone through God's refining process to become complete with God's grace and truth embedded in them. They will never turn against God as Satan and one third of the angels did. Christ's followers are being matured to have great grace and truth as Christ in addition to sharing His inheritance and excellent name (Heb 1:1–4; Rom 8:17).

***God is going to finish the good work that He has started among those who learn to love, trust, and obey Him.*** Jesus has a proven track record. Just look at His ongoing obedient, mature relationship with our Heavenly Father. Looking at Jesus' actions and words gives His followers great confidence that they can also live without anything separating them from a holy, full-time, and caring relationship with God and one another.

Knowing that Jesus willingly shares His position as the “only son” of God with all who submit to Him as lord and savior should motivate everyone to joyfully follow Jesus out of heart-felt love. As part of God's family, Jesus' followers joyfully join God in the creation of His eternal close-knit holy family.



## Experiencing Good & Evil Demands a Decision

Even if you do not believe in God, it is highly probable that you have sensed an ongoing battle of evil trying to prevail over good. Most have come to realize that there is a way of life that is beneficial and many ways of life that ultimately bring harm to ourselves and others. The way that we live with others makes a real difference in the here-and-now and in the future. In reality, God has created the universe with real absolute standards for all life. When we follow His rules, we do good for ourselves and others, when we do not, we harm ourselves and others, which is bad, evil. Because God is communicating to all, on some level, everyone is aware of God's standards (Rom 1:18–32; 2:14–15).

Not only are most aware of the difference between evil and good, all participate in doing both. There is plenty of wrongdoing by all. No one is innocent. Everyone has fallen short of living out a perfectly righteous life according to God's standards *except Jesus Christ* (Rom 3:23; Isa 53:4–9; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Peter 2:21–24). Evil is recognized by most societies around the world, and due to the harm done through evil actions, more time is spent keeping current on the latest evil than on good. Whether speaking an unkind word, not helping someone whom God puts in our path, directly disobeying God's instructions for our personal lives, lying, cheating, stealing, killing, enslaving, sexually abusing, or doing some other form of evil, we all see and do some evil.

### Evil vs. Good

Personally, we have all experienced times in our lives in which we have done something that has hurt someone else and have either felt immediate or eventual remorse. Even if someone has not been walking in spiritual awareness of God's presence and

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continual teaching, most recognize the fact that we all struggle with self-centered desires. Whether we listen to the leading of God or not, He talks to all and moves as many as listen into a place of awareness that helps make good choices easier (John 8:31b–32; 16:8–11).

We all need to listen to God more carefully, because He will help us look past our self-centered desires and block Satan's deceptions and noise (2 Cor 4:3–4). Satan's deceptions and noise are generated by many sources to include entertainment, technological gadgets, and even so-called friends at times. If we do not listen to God, we are controlled in some way by Satan, the Evil One (1 John 5:19). God desires to develop our individual consciences and teach each of us our assigned good works (Phil 2:13; Eph 2:10; 1 Cor 12:18). If we ignore or do not hear God's voice due to our busyness, distractions, or general disobedience toward Him, it is easy to miss out on what is really going on and miss the blessings that come from living out our lives within God's will.

Even with many in a state of hostility toward God and toward His followers (Rom 5:10; John 17:14–15), God stays at work in everyone's life bringing as many as possible to a place of turning from self-centered ways to Him and His righteous way of life (Lev 19:1–2; 2 Peter 3:9). This is biblically called *repentance*. God wants everyone to come to a place in his or her life that allows Him to teach them about His genuine concern and love for all, which in turn encourages many to come to Him for salvation (1 John 4:16; cf. Gal 3:26–29).

Although many listen to God enough to know the difference between good and evil, there are many who have not listened well enough to know that *our world is caught in the middle of two powerful kingdoms at war*: the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Hell presently ruled by Satan. God and His kingdom are more powerful and will eventually put Satan and his followers in an isolated place forever called Hell or the Lake of Fire. But, until that happens, God has been using Satan to force everyone to evaluate the good and evil around them and decide on which life style they desire for eternity. Because all of us live out our lives doing and experiencing both good and evil, *each has to decide* if they want a close relationship with God and those who

are listening to Him, or do they prefer to reject God's lordship and way of life knowing that this alternative gives some freedom from His leadership but leads to a downward spiral toward eventual eternal shame and suffering.

Satan is out to deceive as many as possible trying to keep them from listening to God so that they will never know God nor His Word. God on the other hand, wants everyone to understand reality and consider carefully their future. When individuals start listening to God because of His great love and concern for all, God starts to mold and shape them into His own image. On the other hand, for those who do not listen, God allows Satan to continue to deceive them into thinking that they are going to have a life of eternal peace *on their own terms*. Whatever one ultimately decides determines that one's *eternal destiny*. No matter where you stand, you should take note that our world really is in the middle of a major spiritual war with *eternal consequences* and that God eventually will separate those who want to be with Him and His way of life from those who do not. God rescues (*malat*) those who listen to Him (Dan 12:2; cf. Matt 25:45–46; Rom 2:11–13; Gal 6:7; Rev 20:12).

If you could look ahead in time and get a glimpse of both future kingdoms in their final states and see God and His perfected family living in love, peace, and joy and Satan and his disobedient followers continually hurting one another, what would you be willing to do for yourself and others in order to live with God forever? In reality, God has already made a way for you through Jesus Christ (Rom 1:16–17). ***If you really would like to know God better in order to follow Him, God will help you live out a more fulfilling life in the here and now experiencing His love, peace, and joy as part of your growing relationship with Him and the Church*** (Rom 6:22–23).

### Spiritual Warfare in General

From now on, *be continually strengthened in the Lord in the strength of His might*. Put on all of the armor of God in order to enable yourselves to stand before the scheming of the Devil, *because our*

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*battle is not against blood and flesh, but instead against the leaders, the authorities, the cosmic powers of this darkness, the spirits of evil in the heavenly places. Eph 6:10–12; cf. Rev 12:7; 20:7–10*

***Let's keep in mind that the Creation is God's work!*** As He enlarges His intimate close-knit holy family, Satan continually keeps fighting hard against Him and His growing family. There came a time in his fight against God that Satan encouraged Israel's religious leaders to crucify Jesus, but to his surprise *instead of getting rid of the Father's only Son, he unknowingly lost the battle to separate eternally all of God's children from their Creator.*

God teaches us through John 3:14–16 that Jesus' death on humanity's behalf *was necessary* in order to remove sin for all those who were trusting God for help in their present condition and redemption of their souls from Sheol (Hades). As we consider the entire creation, God teaches us in Hebrews 10:4–10 that Jesus' death removed sin not only for those who were trusting God in Jesus' day, but for all who learned to trust God from the beginning of the Creation until the end of Christ's thousand year reign (Rev 20:1–10).

From the time of Jesus' death on the Cross and Satan's realization that he had lost the battle for the souls of all humanity, he has been doing his best *to minimize God's victory* (1 Cor 15:55–57). Satan has been doing his best to distract, placate, intimidate, and mislead as many people as possible so that they will not take the time to figure out what eternity will be like without God's presence (Rev 12:9, 12). Over the centuries, as God has been building His eternal family and filling His eternal Kingdom with holy individuals, Satan has come to realize that his time is becoming short. Because of this, Satan has been escalating his attacks in the last couple hundred years. Satan is striving to silence God's obedient children on earth, as he continues to deceive those who are not following God (1 John 3:7–13; cf. 5:18–19; Rev 3:16).

### *This Is Personal*

If you are a committed follower of Christ, have you ever wondered why some of the good things that you wish to do seem so difficult to start and accomplish although part of you knows that it should be easier? Does it seem that during the times when you want to do some good knowing that God has put something special in your heart, you seem to be swimming in molasses instead of water? If this is the case, you have experienced spiritual warfare firsthand. You may have come to realize that many of your own doubts and hesitations coupled with circumstances around you were *not* just part of the natural order of everyday life. In many cases, they were caused by spiritual warfare going on in your life (Eph 6:12).

Satan and his followers are constantly traveling among all of Christ's followers looking for ways to hinder or stop completely what God has laid on their hearts (Eph 2:10). As God's children pray and seek God's will for their individual and collective lives, they need to be aware—as Daniel was—that this ongoing battle is ultimately God's. Although no human can see the spiritual realm, God has incorporated His good angels into this battle over the souls of man to work with His obedient children on earth. God's angels are helping Christ's followers continually minute-by-minute day-by-day (Heb 1:13–14). Those who follow Christ are used by God to help awaken and rescue those who are not listening to Him as the spiritual battles rage between the kingdoms of Good and Evil to the end of this Messianic Age.

### *This Is Ongoing*

During the reigns of Darius, King of Chaldea, and Cyrus, King of Persia, God gave Daniel visions showing him future events (Dan 9–10). We see from Daniel's vision during the third year of Cyrus, that there was ongoing spiritual warfare just as today. One of Satan's angels, who was in a leadership position over Persia, had slowed one of God's angels down for 21 days until the archangel Michael came to his aid. Michael's intervention

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allowed God's assigned angel to go to Daniel and give him insight regarding God's plans in all that was transpiring (Dan 10:12–14). This messenger from God stated that he was going right back to continue his fight against the same demonic leader in Persia as well as engage in battle against one of Satan's angels who was heading up warfare in Greece, as soon as he had given Daniel a vision from God (Dan 10:20). Satan consistently wages war with those who faithfully follow God.

Approximately five hundred years later, we learn that the same type of ongoing spiritual warfare was continuing. Paul stated that Satan had slowed him down when wanting to visit and encourage the Thessalonians whom he had led to Christ (1 Thess 2:18). Satan is consistently waging war against God's obedient children causing as much stumbling and suffering as possible ( e.g. 1 Thess 2:14–16; 3:4; 2 Thess 1:4–5; cf. Luke 16:13), but if we listen to God, He will use our trials and tribulations to build our character (Rom 5:3–5).

Daniel's account and Paul's warning about the bad angels who are helping Satan should be a wake-up call for all of us. This is not a game with simple consequences. This ongoing war between good and evil has eternal consequences for all. In Daniel's account above, God could have helped his angels overcome Satan faster or even immediately, but He works in such a way that His angels mature and become more skilled through experience just as He works with Christ's followers (2 Thess 3:1; Heb 1:14; 5:14). Christ's followers are required to do some things partially in their strength in order for God to develop their character (Rom 5:3–5; Heb 12:1–3; cf. 2:10).

Jesus did not ask our Heavenly Father to remove any of His followers from the evil of the world, but He did ask the Father to protect His followers from the Evil One in His name. Christ's followers are part of His family and will be protected accordingly by God as part of that family (John 17:11, 15–17). Whenever Christ's followers fall short in any given battle or circumstance, God, who dwells in His obedient trusting children, helps them overcome whether they physically live or die (1 John 2:25–27; 4:4).

**Spiritual Warfare & Satan's Deceptions**

Do not be amazed, for *Satan transforms (disguises) himself as an angel of light*. Therefore, it is not a great thing if indeed his servants transform/disguise themselves as servants of righteousness whose end shall be according to their works. 2 Cor 11:14–15

There is a common thread to all of Satan's scheming and attacks on humanity. Satan wants to take over God's top position of authority. He has turned a third of the angels in heaven against God (Rev 12:4) and now wishes to keep as many as possible on earth from knowing God. The truth of the matter is that whoever is not listening to God, is in reality fighting against God whether consciously or not ( John 8:42–47; Eph 2:1–3; 1 John 5:19). Jesus said, "By their finished works you will know them [Matt 7:16a]."

If Satan can keep people concentrating on themselves and their families, in reality, he has kept them from knowing God and His love for all. If people start listening to God, some will obediently interact with Him, and God will develop within them a loving trust for Him due to His love and faithfulness. Those who choose to listen to God and obey Him will eventually come to a time of repentance and Spiritual birth into God's eternal holy family.

***The Wide Road Leading to Destruction***

In his battle for ultimate control over everything, Satan has been constantly trying to preoccupy humanity with itself, scare humanity into submission, and/or turn humanity from God through the introduction of many counterfeit gods and religious structures. Some of these counterfeits scare people into submission and others enable people to remain self-centered living for themselves and their families.

Our world is full of Satan's counterfeits for God. First take a look at the way that the world regards God. Because Satan has not been able to remove knowledge of our Creator from humanity,

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he has created a myriad of religious institutions to confuse many. In reality, these false gods and religions satisfy many through deception and help keep them away from the one true God and connected to himself. The last thing that Satan wants is for people to know reality (2 Cor 4:3–4; cf. John 8:44). In addition to riches, personal aspirations, entertainment, and even laziness, Satan uses individuals and fabricated religions such as Hinduism, Siddhartha Gautama (Buddhism), Mohammed (Moslems), Joseph Smith (Mormons), Charles Russell (Jehovah's Witnesses), and others to distort reality in order to make it harder for people to know their true creator. Even with all of Satan's cunning deception, he cannot disguise his deceptive false teachings because they *all* exhibit some of his personal attributes, some much more than others. If you come to know God and His Word, the counterfeits become easier to recognize.

### **Self-centeredness**

If Satan can keep people thinking about themselves as the center of life, he has won. Due to the sin of God's first created, Adam and Eve, all are born into a self-centered, selfish world that is in constant rebellion against God and His standards (Rom 5:6–10). Satan uses the desires of fallen humanity against itself. If an individual is focused primarily on himself or herself, Satan is quick to remove anything that these individuals may have heard that is true about God from the forefront of their thoughts and replace them with substitutes (Matt 13:19).

### **Loss of Familiar**

If individuals start thinking about God as the Holy Spirit leads, Satan will try hard to make their lives miserable through many circumstances including the loss of friends and outbursts of the world. Satan knows that most people like what is familiar and will not move easily into unfamiliar realms to include friendships without a good reason (Matt 13:20–21). But for those who step out in even a little faith, God is faithful to continue to draw them to

Himself. He will teach them a better way of life based on a genuine concern for all.

### **Worldly Success**

When one considers following Jesus, he or she may encounter an even greater hurdle than making new friends. Christ will start to reshape their priorities including redefining success, which may move Satan to tempt them with additional sources of revenue. If he is able to keep them distracted with additional resources that require additional time, many will lose their developing spiritual connection to God and go back to following other gods including money (Matt 13:22).

Satan will do anything including offering additional monetary success to some in order to keep them from making a real commitment to God. It is amazing how good self-fulfillment through elevation of self looks until one learns from God how much better His way of life is. But, if the individuals who get this far in their walk with Christ make a commitment *to deny themselves* and join God in building His eternal holy family, God will continue to shape and mold them eventually bringing them closer and closer to Jesus Christ's perfect moral image as they lead others to God out of a growing love for God and man.

### ***Following Jesus and Intensifying Battles***

For those who start following Jesus wanting to live their lives according to the Fathers' will and ways, the battles normally intensify. Satan has already lost the battle for their souls, so he now must concentrate on how many more souls will be pulled from his grasp through the individuals who have made a solid commitment to follow God's leading. Christ's followers know that they are the light of the world and that God works through them not around them. They are the hands and feet of Christ (Eph 4:4; 1 Cor 12:13). If Satan can reduce Christian witness to the world by distracting them, he knows that he still has more opportunity to keep non-Christians in the dark and away from God.

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In my own life, I have had many times when I became aware of God's desire for me to do some task that would help others both physically and spiritually. It seems that without fail all type of situations would come up to distract me from doing my assignment (Matt 6:25–33). As I look back over approximately thirty years of following Christ as an adult with a genuine commitment, I pray that I have at least produced God's desired outcome fifty percent of the time. It is so easy to be sidetracked, if we do not stay focused on Jesus (Heb 12:1–3). I can recount everything from simple emergency repairs on our house or cars, to immediate family needs, to some other ministry needs, or even to expansion of current ministry or work that would try to pull me away from doing the current mission that God was asking me to complete. I know that am not alone in experiencing this type of spiritual attack.

### **Success: a Continual Temptation**

For some, even after committing to follow Jesus, Satan will continue to use a common distraction that transcends time. He will tempt Christ's followers with additional revenue for their families, if they will just give up more of their time from serving God. Over the years, I have seen Satan use additional income to move many of my friends and acquaintances away from ministries that God had laid on their hearts. Many had become excited about what God had asked them to do. Before they became invested in God's work, they were faced with opportunities to make additional money for themselves and their families, and normally, there was additional work attached to that money. In many cases, they chose to forego God's ministry in order to obtain additional monetary security or simply to spend more on their own desires. Satan wins when we choose additional money over accepting God's assignments. We must all be diligent to listen to God, and then do whatever it takes to accomplish His will. I know from experience that God will see us through the spiritual and resulting physical and mental battles into success, if we are faithful to Him.

## No Pain, No Gain

Another common deception permeating many of our churches today is the idea that God does not want us to work through anything that is difficult. Many of Christ's followers are led to believe that if something is difficult, God must be shutting the door to that assignment. Some of Christ's followers just do not know any better, but there is a second group within our churches who do not know Christ and therefore have no clue about what it means to deny themselves, pick up their individual crosses, and follow Jesus (Luke 14:26–27). This group of potential followers of Christ confuse those who are truly trying to follow Christ because Satan uses them to make complacency and other abnormalities look normal (2 Cor 11:14–15).

The norm for a true Christian is *to be radically different* than the World as he or she truly listens to the leading of the Holy Spirit. All we have to do is look at the New Testament accounts of our forefathers as they ministered in the first century and realize that most went through many trials and tribulations as they served Christ. Following Christ is not suppose to be easy, but it should be fulfilling! Following Christ will not be easy because the battle over the outcome of every single life *is* significant. God loves everyone and wants all to come to a place in their lives where they will turn from their self-centered ways to Him and His ways, and in so doing be saved (2 Peter 3:9). There are eternal consequences for our actions. Although it is difficult to follow Christ, the outcome of faithful discipleship produces godly character, excitement, inner peace, and great joy (Rom 5:1–5; Gal 5:22; John 14:27; 15:8–11; 17:13).

## Meaningful Relationships

If Satan cannot sidetrack Christ's followers from doing their God-given assignments through some form of additional work or adversity, he may try to keep them preoccupied from God's work through entertainment and/or entanglement in sins (Heb 12:1). In America, I believe that the most benign type of

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diversion from God's will is entertainment. *If we are not careful, we will spend too much time watching television, going to live performances, interacting in sports or other recreational activities, or just staying busy with our computers, i-pads, and other gadgets without developing godly relationships.*<sup>13</sup> ***This is a sin!***

Satan has caused many to replace meaningful periods of work and social interaction with self-centered entertainment and/or technological activity that helps one feel productive but, in reality, only keeps one preoccupied. Many are now spending unnecessary long periods each day texting, e-mailing, internet browsing, gaming, and all sorts of self-absorbing activities that are contrary to building solid godly relationships. Is this the new opium of the twenty-first century? ***Self-centered activity and entertainment are easy; working hard and building meaningful godly relationships takes effort.***

As we come to know God and His desire for our lives (Titus 2:14), we begin to understand the importance of a close-knit holy relationship with God and one another. Even within everyday routines, Satan is at work destroying godly relationships through many perversions of what God created for good (2 Tim 2:22–26).

*Consider food.* God has created food to sustain our temporary physical bodies. Satan has caused many to substitute overeating, for godly intimate relationships. Overeating is easy, building caring intimate relationships takes work.

*Consider drugs.* God has given us the wisdom to use certain chemicals to assist the body. Satan has caused many to misuse all types of drugs as a substitute for godly caring relationships that serve one another. The misuse of drugs is easy, building caring relationships takes work.

*Consider sex.* God has created sex as one of our bodily functions in order to procreate expanding His creation and eternal family while increasing intimacy between a man and woman within a life-long marriage relationship. Satan has caused many to substitute perverted forms of sex instead of building godly intimate caring relationships. Perverted sex is easy, but building a godly caring relationship between a man and a woman takes work. A godly single heterosexual relationship is the basis of a sound family structure for the proper edification of our children and in reality the whole human race. A godly home is extremely helpful

in learning to love God and man, but beware, Satan is out to kill and destroy as many caring relationships as possible (1 Peter 5:8). *Listen to God!* He will help you build solid caring relationships and move you to help the lost and hurting of our world (Rev 3:20; John 15:1–11).

### Stay Focused!

Reverence God and keep His commandments.

Eccl 12:13b

The writer of Ecclesiastes was dismayed at the end of his life after working hard and doing much. In reality, his efforts did not amount to much when looked at from an eternal perspective. Even if we work really hard and smart and acquire much, when we die we leave everything to others who will do whatever they wish with their newly acquired possessions. This cycle will continue until God shuts down this side of eternity. John Ortberg has written a book titled *It All Goes Back in the Box*, which portrays this concept well using the idea of winning at any cost at Monopoly to illustrate the futility of winning in this world at any cost and not taking into consideration that when the game is over, all the pieces go back into the box. No one keeps the physical things that he or she acquires when physical death comes, but relationships are eternally important.

Solomon came to a point late in his life when he realized that what really matters is our response to God during life on this side of eternity. Do we learn to reverence God and consequently abide by His standards and help others to know Him, which has eternal value (Eccl 12:13–14; John 8:31b–32; 17:3), or do we live foolishly and end up separated from God and forfeit an eternal life of peace and joy with Him and His eternal family? Satan has been tempting humanity from the beginning of the Creation to live foolishly and end up living an eternal life of shame and pain.

In reality, it is true for every generation that ***if one does not stay focused on God and follow His lead***, Satan will deceive that individual into working against God and His Kingdom (John 8:12; 8:43–44; 2 Peter 1:4; 1 John 2:16). It makes no difference whether

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one is a school teacher, a nurse, a doctor, social worker, minister, or some one else who helps people as part of his or her life work, if that individual is not living under Christ's lordship, Satan will be misguiding and leading him.

Consider Jesus' conversation with some of the religious zealots of His day who thought that they were walking with God. Scripture is clear that even though one may appear to be doing God's work, unless he or she is actually listening to God and **doing His will**, that individual is not part of His eternal holy family (Matt 7:21–23; John 7:17). Jesus told those individuals who were claiming to serve God in His day that although they were biological descendants of Abraham, in reality, they were following the Devil, Satan, which made him their father whom they were honoring through their actions (John 8:37–44). Jesus wanted them to understand the consequences of following the desires of the flesh through Satan's deceptions instead of carefully listening to God.

When you consider Jesus' ministry and all of the good that He did, how could so many supposedly godly people turn on Him and want Him crucified? Jesus' very fulfillment came from doing His Father's will (John 4:34), yet Satan led many of Jesus' contemporaries to a place where they were blind to the identity of the Son of God and in the end even openly stated that they had no king other than Caesar (John 19:15. f: Matt 28:18–20; Acts 1:7–8; cf. John 15:1–2). What happened to God being their king? Satan is very good at deception and continues to deceive even Christ's followers today whenever they slumber.

Today, many of our local churches are slumbering so soundly that they are ignoring their most important calling, which is to proclaim the goodness and purposes of God to those who do not know Him. Somehow, Satan has blinded many in our local churches about the benefit to their families and world of walking in holiness and about the benefit of walking in perfection later in God's presence forever. *Satan has somehow deceived a fairly large amount of people who go to church on a regular basis to ignore God's teachings on present sanctification and future placement in either Heaven or Hell.* In fact over the years, Satan has convinced many to believe another lie that is worse than the one he told Adam and Eve because its consequences are eternal.

As in the beginning, Satan has been continually calling God a liar throughout the Creation (Gen 3:1–5; John 8:44). He has been teaching that God has lied to everyone, and in reality, no one will experience an eternal separation from God called the Second Death (Rev 20:11–15). Through this lie, he states that everyone goes to Heaven whether they listen to God or not because God loves them too much to allow anyone to go to Hell. In reality, it is because God loves everyone so much that He will not force anyone to join Him and His eternal holy family; everyone must choose to be with Him and receive His lordship as part of the family package.

And, for those who trust God and know from His Word that eternal separation from God is real, Satan has come up with another lie and is now trying to convince some that eternity is not really eternal. He is attempting to convince as many as possible that the Church has not understood God's Word correctly for the last 2000 years. Satan is now teaching that those who go to Hell will only go for a short time, but it will feel like being there for eternity. ***What a surprise!*** Satan is at it again. He continues to lie in order to bring about death for as many as possible, but God's Word is clear: individuals who reject Him and His way of life during this part of their eternal lives will be isolated from Him *forever*.



## Spiritual Warfare: a Byproduct of Free-will

From the days of John the Baptist until now, the Kingdom of the Heavens is suffering violence (*biazetai*), and violent ones are taking it by force. Matt 11:12

The Law and the prophets stood until John; from then the Good News of the Kingdom of God is being proclaimed (*euangelizetai*) and *everyone is forcing himself (biazetai)* into it. But, it is easier for the heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the Law to fall/fail. Luke 16:16–17

***Everyone is trying to force their way into Heaven!*** Today, Satan is still at war with those whom God created to be part of His eternal family blinding and deceiving as many as possible. All humanity lives in a world caught up in war between two kingdoms, God's and the rebels', whose main advocate is Satan. Satan is a self-proclaimed ruler who decided before the Creation to overthrow God and rule everything (Matt 4:8–10; Eph 6:12). Throughout the Creation until Christ's thousand year reign on Earth and at the end of the Creation for a brief moment, Satan leads those who are not listening to God (John 12:31; 16:11; Rev 12:12). Scripture teaches us that Satan has been rebelling against God and trying to take over His position of lead authority for a long time and will keep on rebelling until he is placed permanently in the eternal Lake of Fire, Hell (John 8:44; Matt 25:41; Rev 20:10).

It is clear from Scripture that this is a bloody war. John the Baptist died proclaiming that the Messiah and His Kingdom were here. Jesus died representing God as He demonstrated the love of

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God through His actions and words. Most of Jesus' main disciples died proclaiming the truth about God's plan of salvation for those who would follow Jesus. Over the centuries, thousands upon thousands have died as they followed Jesus through the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus said that He did not come into our world to produce world peace but instead division between those who would learn to follow Him and those who would not (Luke 12:49–51). Jesus also said that although many were trying to force their way into the Kingdom of Heaven, it would not happen. God has the final say and His conditions given through the Law and prophets would stand. It was easier for the heavens and the earth to be totally destroyed than for God's Word to fail (Luke 16:16–17; cf. Matt 5:17–20). It is clear through His Word, the Bible, that God's will shall be accomplished—period!

As you study Scripture, you come to realize that God the Father has had everything under control from the very beginning. He sent Jesus into our world to teach us further revelation and then at just the right time, He died for all (Gal 4:4; Acts 2:23; 4:27–28). God teaches us that this battle between His Kingdom and the Kingdom of Hell will come to an end in God's time when the Kingdom of Heaven is filled (Matt 13:47–48; 22:1–14). God's Kingdom is commonly called the Kingdom of Heaven, and because of Christ's redemptive work, it is also called the Kingdom of His Beloved Son, the Kingdom of Christ (Col 1:13; Eph 5:5).

When Jesus became incarnate and ministered among us, He brought God's Kingdom to us (Matt 4:17; 12:28). Jesus taught the world that those who walk in God's kingdom ways are blessed (Matt 5:1–10; 7:21; 18:4).

As we consider our participation in the battle going on around us, we all must eventually ***make a decision*** regarding our *eternal allegiance*. On this battle field called earth, there has been and continues to be many liars teaching many false concepts about the nature of the one true God, YHWH. As we discussed earlier, there are many non-existent fabricated gods who stand in for Satan. They are presented to humanity as substitutes to replace YHWH. *Satan uses these shadows of himself* to distort reality and keep people from knowing their creator and His desire for an eternal close-knit holy family. Information on Satan's created gods

and religious institutions can be studied through books such as Josh McDowell's *A Ready Defense*.<sup>14</sup>

God's Anointed One, Jesus, the true Messiah, came to lead people into the light teaching reality and saving them from eternal separation from the one true God. Jesus, the Messiah, came bringing abundant life to all who listen here-and-now and for eternity (John 10:10). Jesus is the only access to our Heavenly Father (John 10:9; 14:6; Eph 2:18). If Christ's followers stay focused on Christ and follow Him, they will not be deceived by Satan and will lead many into the light to meet God (Matt 5:14–16; John 15:1–2). But, as the battle for the souls of humanity rages, we understand from God that there are many who will stay in the dark in order to do things for themselves at the expense of others and that God will not force them to change (Matt 7:13; John 1:9–13; 3:19–20; 2 Thess 2:10–12).

### **After the Cross**

After this, Jesus knowing that everything had now been completed in order to fulfill Scripture said, "I am thirsty." . . . Therefore, when He received the sour wine, Jesus said, "***It has been completed,***" and having bowed His head, He delivered up His spirit.

John 19:28–30

Now, after the Cross, it is different. Those who obeyed God prior to the Cross along with all those who are obeying God through submission to Jesus Christ after the Cross have a close eternal relationship with God. Through Jesus' death on the Cross, everyone who has ever lived in obedience to God will end up being made perfectly righteous living with God as part of His close-knit holy family (Titus 2:14; Gal 3:13–14). The greatest part of the pain of the childbirth of God's eternal family was over at the Cross (Ps 90:2; Rom 8:22).

***Satan knowing that his time was getting shorter and shorter began in a renewed intensity doing all that he could to hide the reality of Christ's victory over death*** (John 17:4; 19:28–30). Satan is still effectively deceiving many into thinking that if they desire to be in the Kingdom of God through whatever

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religion or life style that they choose to follow, in the end, God will accept them into His eternal presence. ***Nothing could be further from the truth!*** God has clearly spoken through His Word proclaiming that Jesus of Nazareth is the only way, the only access, into His presence and kingdom (John 14:6). No one will become a child of God through his or her own will, through the desire of family members and friends, nor through any one other than God Himself (John 1:12–13).

### Resist Satan

When I consider a good friend and a former pastor of mine, Dr. Mark Cortis, I remember a life that was anything but easy. God teaches us through the Apostle Peter to *resist Satan* and he will eventually flee (1 Peter 5:8–9). Christ’s followers should never flee spiritual battles because they serve the one true God; He is able to overcome all enemies. God is able to overcome anything that Satan tries to do, and He is with and in all of His obedient children (John 14:23; 1 John 4:4).

Mark Cortis was a follower of Christ who resisted Satan continuously doing what he knew to be right. He constantly had to deal with spiritual battles within his charge, and for the last fifteen years of his life, he had to deal with ongoing spiritual battles intensified by physical illness. Mark wrote a book prior to his death entitled *The Truth about Spiritual Warfare: Your Place in the Battle Between God and Satan*, which discusses some of his battles and spiritual warfare in general.<sup>15</sup> Because of his steadfast work in proclaiming God’s Word and his resolve to do God’s will at any cost, he became an effective contemporary role model. It was through Mark’s willingness to give of himself and follow Jesus faithfully that I came to a place in my life at twenty eight that I was willing to do likewise and made a genuine commitment to follow Jesus to the best of my ability.

Under Mark’s teaching, various Bible classes, and personal Bible study, Jesus not only became my active big brother looking out for me, but He also became *my lord* and *primary mentor* (John 8:31–32; 1 John 2:27). As I looked at Jesus’ life on earth, I began to get a glimpse of what He had given up in Heaven (Phil 2:5–8;

Heb 2:9–11) and suffered on earth in order to make a way for everyone’s sins to be removed (2 Cor 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24). As I continued to study Scripture, the Apostle Paul became another mentor teaching me what faithful service looked like. When it was the right time, Jesus revealed Himself to Paul and corrected his understanding of God’s plan of salvation (Acts 9:1–20; 22:1–16; Gal 1:11–17). From that point on, Paul was willing to give up his religious prestige and secure life and endure hardship after hardship (2 Cor 11:22–31; Phil 2:4–12) in order to proclaim the reality of the righteousness of God (Rom 1:16–17) and His atoning work through Christ (John 3:16–17). Paul sacrificed everything in order to help rescue those who did not know God but were willing to listen to the Gospel as he proclaimed it through his actions and words (Phil 3:7–21; 2 Cor 11).

Jesus did only good as He walked according to His Father’s will and He suffered greatly. Paul suffered greatly after he started following Jesus. Dr. Cortis suffered much as he followed Jesus. In general, all who follow Jesus will be asked to give up some of what they could have had for themselves in this world, suffering loss in order to overcome the schemes of Satan (Luke 14:26–33). Everything that God asks of His children helps others to see God’s love and compassion for all, which in turn helps some to come to their senses and ask Him for help in changing their lives to match His (Lev 19:1–2; 2 Cor 5:17–18). Everything that God asks His obedient children to do will help others to see that there is a better way of life here-and-now and for eternity. Christ’s followers will be refined in the process.

I believe that Satan’s two most effective forms of combat against Christ’s followers are deception and intimidation. His greatest deception is tricking Christ’s followers into thinking that they are not worthy of witnessing, not able to witness, and/or not needed. In reality, all of Christ’s followers are called to witness, enabled to witness through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, and worthy of witnessing through Christ’s righteousness working in them (Matt 28:18–20; John 15:1–5; Acts 1:8). If you fear witnessing for any reason, ask God to give you discernment and empowerment. He will help you know when and how to witness in all circumstances.

### Putting on the Whole Armor of God

*God empowers and guides those who are listening to Him.* Since the Cross, Jesus personally guides, protects, and empowers His followers through the *indwelling of the Holy Spirit* (John 14:16–17; Acts 1:8). Jesus' followers from all Christian denominations need to keep their spiritual armor in good working order, properly fitted, and *on* at all times in order to see through Satan's deceptions and move according to God's will (Eph 6:10–15). The full armor of God is supplied by God to all of Jesus' followers who stay in a good working relationship with Him. God Himself protects them as they follow Jesus through the ongoing spiritual battles. At times, God asks His children to give up their physical lives and come Home helping others to know Him through their sacrifices.

When Paul used the metaphor of putting on the whole armor of God in Ephesians 6 as a way to be prepared to do spiritual battle against Satan and his accomplices, he wanted Christ's followers to realize that they need God's help, and as long as they *walk according to God's will, they have all the protection that they need*. Like a good soldier putting on each piece of defensive and offensive gear in order to be prepared properly for battle, they will be able to overcome with God working in and through them as they faithfully follow Jesus.

Look at Paul's list of pieces comprising the spiritual armor that all of Christ's followers are to wear:

- (1) ***truth***, which makes up a carrying belt for all of their spiritual tools;
- (2) ***righteousness***, which makes up a breast plate protecting their vital organs;
- (3) ***preparedness to proclaim the Gospel of Peace***, which makes them effective witnesses wherever God leads;
- (4) ***faith***, which provides a movable shield to be positioned as needed to stop Satan's deadly thrusts;
- (5) ***salvation***, which provides a helmet covering their heads so that they do not suffer loss of ability to see, hear, and understand what is happening;

(6) *knowledge of the Word of God* through the teaching of the Holy Spirit and willingness to follow His leading, which empowers each with both an offensive and defensive sword in order to clear the way for truth to be known; and (7) *continual prayer*– at all times staying in contact with God through prayer.

Living holy lives and handling the Word of God correctly through the instruction and leading of the Holy Spirit allows Christ's followers to defend themselves against Satan and to overcome Satan's deceptive practices against those walking in darkness (Eph 6:10–18; 1 Thess 5:14–22).

Even if we live righteously, study God's Word, and follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, a holy life does not mean that we will not someday become a casualty of war. Like Jesus, God the Father is using our efforts including the loss of our physical lives for the ultimate building up of His kingdom and holy family, which is also *our* kingdom and eternal close-knit family. God will bring good out of every experience of pain and suffering that His children undergo (Rom 8:28; cf. Col 1:24).

### **Heaven or Hell?**

Have you ever wondered why God does not just take each of us into Heaven and show us around and then take us to Hell and do likewise so that we could make an informed decision of where we want to be for eternity? When I was young, I did. It seemed that manifesting the two would be an easier way to convince many to follow Him. But, as I got older, I realized that God does **not** want anyone making a decision to follow Him based on *things* but instead on the eternal relationship that He offers all. Although Heaven is going to be a great place to call home, a place that will make even the best places on earth seem mediocre, God wants us to make our eternal choice of family and friends based on a desire to live with Him in a truly caring community. If we do not submit to our loving Heavenly Father and allow Him to complete our transformation into His moral and family image, we have

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automatically chosen Hell for our eternal home (2 Thess 2:10–12).  
What does Scripture teach about Hell?

### *Hell*

If an eye of yours causes you to stumble, cast it away; it is better for you to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven one eyed than having two eyes to be cast into Hades where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. Mark 9:47–48 (cf. Matt 7:13–14)

Satan has already made his eternal decision to separate himself from God and overthrow Him if possible. If Satan could kill the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, and all who are associated with Them, he would. But, the good news is that God is not only filled with loving-kindness toward those who receive Him, He is great and *able to maintain control*. Satan cannot change what God sets in motion, and ***God desires for there to be two kingdoms***: the Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of Hell. God is insuring that He and those who choose to be part of His eternal close-knit family have perfect love with its resulting joy and peace. He will ***not allow*** any disruptions in the ***new*** Heaven, but the kingdom called Hell will be full of agony and despair.

When we look to God's Word to understand the living conditions of the Kingdom of Hell more fully, we come away with a deeper desire to help as many as possible make it into the Kingdom of Heaven. Hell is a very disturbing and hurtful place. Once one is placed there in shame, he or she stays forever (Dan 12:2; Matt 25:46). We learn from Scripture that those who are placed in Hell for eternity undergo eternal shame and suffering that affects them both physically and mentally. We see metaphorical imagery depicting physical pain compared to being burned continuously by fire and an eternal worm devouring the flesh but never completing the task (Isa 66:24; Mark 9:47–48).<sup>16</sup> We also see the pain of Hell as something similar to having just experienced the loss of a loved one who is very dear to you causing much "weeping and gnashing of teeth [Matt 8:12; 13:42; 25:30]." There are also other metaphorical images of general

humiliation, shame, and discomfort including metaphorical imagery of sleeping on a bed of maggots and using a giant worm for a covering (Isa 14:11; Dan 12:2). We do not have explicit statements regarding the pain, suffering, and humiliation of being in Hell forever, but we have enough metaphorical imagery that shouts loudly, ***“beware, stay out, pain, danger, and humiliation ahead!”***

When one rejects God, their pain and suffering starts immediately after physical death (Luke 16:23–25), while waiting in lower Sheol (Hades) for their final judgement in God’s court at the end of Jesus’ thousand year reign. All of the disobedient wait in Hades until the great judgement day at which time they will be formally charged and judged according to their actions (Matt 25:45; Rom 2:13; Rev 20:12), and then they will be sentenced to the *second death*, which is total eternal separation from God in a place called Hell, Gehenna, the Lake of Fire (Rev 20:11–15), which burns forever (Matt 25:41, 46; Rev 19:20).

Considering terminology, most of our modern English usage of the word “hell” in Scripture comes from translating two Greek words, *Geenna* (Gehenna) and *Tartarosas* (Tartarus) as “hell.” First, we learn from Scripture that Hell (Gehenna) is not the same place as Sheol, which is called Hades in the New Testament (Acts 2:27, 31).<sup>17</sup> When Scripture is examined, we find that Sheol (Hades) is in reality a jail, a place of waiting for the final judgement (Matt 11:21–24; Luke 16:19–31; Rev 20:14).

Before Jesus died on a cross for the sins of all, Sheol was the place where *all* went when they died (1 Sam 2:6; 2 Sam 22:6; Ps 88:3; 89:48; Ezek 26:20), because everyone had to wait for Christ’s atoning work. Until He came, all waited in either upper or lower Sheol. Upper Sheol contained those who had come to trust God during their lifetime while lower Sheol contained those who had not.

We learn from 1 Samuel 28:15, that King Saul actually was able to interrupt Samuel’s life in Sheol in order to talk with him about future events. It appears that King David had some understanding that God could and would raise some out of this temporary holding place in the future (Ps 49:15; 86:13). The prophet Daniel also proclaimed a future resurrection of those in Sheol with some obtaining an *eternal* life with God and some

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obtaining an *eternal* state of disgrace and contempt (Dan 12:2). God gave further wisdom through one of David's psalms declaring that in addition to David's expected resurrection, God's Anointed One, the coming Messiah would be raised from the dead of Sheol without suffering bodily decay (Acts 2:22–36).

The Old Testament writers knew of two areas within Sheol: the higher was reserved for the faithful and preferred over the second, which was further down in the depths of Sheol and reserved for the wicked (Deut 32:22; Prov 9:18). From Jesus' promise to one of the criminals with whom He was crucified, He promised him that he would be with Him that very day in the upper area, which He called "Paradise" (Luke 23:43). In one of Jesus' teachings, He gives us further insight into Sheol's two areas prior to the Cross: the first area contained those who had learned to trust God during their mortal time on earth. They were living with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob without suffering as they waited for deliverance (Luke 16:22, 25–26). The second area contained those who did not listen to God and were already living in agony (Luke 16:22–24). The latter group is still presently waiting in a jail that we know as lower Sheol (Hades) for the final judgement at which time they will stand trial before God and according to their own individual choices be sentenced to eternal isolation from God, which is also known as the second death (Rev 20:14).

Those who lived in the upper area, Paradise, prior to Jesus' saving death on the faithful's behalf were set free and brought into God's presence when Jesus ascended from His three days in Hades (Eph 4:8–10; Heb 2:9; 2 Cor 5:6–8; cf. 2 Cor 12:1–4). Ignatius (A.D. 37–107), an early Christian writer and martyr, said that after dying on a cross, Jesus went down into Hades alone but ascended with a multitude having tore down the middle-wall, which had been dividing God and man.<sup>18</sup> It appears from Paul's testimony, that Paradise was moved into an area called the Third Heaven (2 Cor 12:4; cf. Luke 23:43), which God allowed Paul to visit and hear things that encouraged him, but that he dared not repeat (2 Cor 12:1–6). Those who were trusting God prior to the Cross were able to finally be made perfectly righteous allowing them to be in God's immediate presence after Christ finished His atoning work. Now, there is only the lower depth of Sheol containing those

who are waiting for their trial on the great day of judgement, which is coming to all who reject God (Rev 20:13).

### *The New Heaven*

I heard a great voice coming from the Throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of the [one true] God is with the [saved] people, and He shall dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, nor sorrow, nor weeping, nor suffering shall be any more; the first things have passed.” Rev 21:3–4; cf. Rev 21:1; 2 Peter 3:10–13

Peter said that the god and father of our Lord Jesus Christ deserves to be blessed by all. He said that it was God the Father who has caused Christ’s followers to be spiritually born, justified, and glorified. It was God’s righteous work that made it possible for those who lived their life trusting God to have an imperishable inheritance in heaven (1 Peter 1:3–5; Rev 12:7; John 3:5; Rom 1:16–17; 8:30). So, what do we know about the new Heaven from Scripture?

Although He does not give a lot of detail about the New Heaven and the New Jerusalem, God gives enough information to inform all that it will make even the very best on earth of any age seem mediocre. Have you ever visited a city suspended in space or sitting on part of the earth that extends vertically 1500 miles high? With our present limitations, we feel that we are doing good to build buildings that extend upward one quarter to one half mile.<sup>19</sup> But what about building a city that shows the glory of God in its dazzling splendor starting with its size (Rev 21:11): it is 1500 miles wide, 1500 miles deep, and 1500 miles high. That is the outer dimensions of the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:2, 16)! This city is home for all of God’s children in Heaven with its gates open all of the time in an eternal state of peace within Heaven (Rev 21:25). The walls of the city consisting of jasper have twelve foundations made of precious gems while much of the city including its streets are made of pure translucent gold (Rev 21:18–21). The city has

three gates on each of its four sides individually made out of gigantic pearls (Rev 21:21). There will be no lights, because God's radiance will illuminate everything and the Lamb will be its central source of light (Rev 21:23; 22:5). Wow!

### *The Relational Aspect of Heaven*

. . . For *our citizenship exists in heaven* from which we are awaiting a savior, the lord Jesus Christ, who *shall transform our body* of lowly nature **into a similar form to the body of His glory** according to the effective working of His ability and the subjecting of all things to Himself. Phil 3:20–21

Beloved, *right now we are children of God*, and it has not yet been manifested what we shall be like. (But), we know that when He is manifested, we shall be like Him because we shall see Him just as He is. 1 John 3:2

Now, what about God's desired relationship with us? We know that God has created us to be part of His eternal close-knit family, and if we receive Him into our lives as **both lord and savior**, God's desire becomes reality for us. God has created each of us to be an intimate family member experiencing perfect peace and joy with Him forever.

In Jesus' personal revelation to John for His followers, we take note that in our future Heaven, God is *with* His children (Rev 21:3). God does not distance Himself in any way from His children, but instead, He is right in the midst of His family. Each individual who learns to trust God will be transformed into a likeness of His very nature (Phil 3:20–21; Rom 8:29).

Part of being like Christ with similar resurrected bodies means that the miracle of Jesus' death on the Cross will become reality for all who learn to trust God from the beginning of time right up to the final judgement (Heb 10:10–14; cf. 1 Peter 3:18). In Heaven, all sin has been removed along with any propensity to sin (Rom 6:22; 8:28–30). Without sin in Heaven, there will be no

more pain, sorrow, and death (Rev 21:4; 22:3). God's children will drink from the Waters and eat from the Tree of Life abundantly (Rev 21:6; 22:1–2).

When we consider Jesus' prayer the night before He died on the Cross as the Savior of the World, we should take special note of the fact that He stated that ***He was sharing His glory with all who were and would be trusting in Him.*** Through His desire to share His sonship and personal attributes with His followers (John 1:14; 20:17), He was insuring our close-knit holy unity. All who become part of God's family are guaranteed perfect unity with Him, the Father, and all other family members (John 17:22–23).

When we look at Jesus' journey for our salvation, it becomes apparent that He went through three changes in the process of saving us. ***First***, the Father and He worked out a transformation from the purely spiritual to the physical realm (spirit & truth: John 1:1–2; 4:24; incarnation: 1:14). The Son, who had been identical to the Father in nature and make-up now took on a much lower form of life culminating in His death on everyone's behalf (Phil 2:5–8). This was a joint venture of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that allowed God to speak to us face-to-face (John 14:9). A ***second*** change occurred after suffering humiliation, a terrible beating, and suffocation on a cross. Jesus in a fallen spiritual state due to taking on the sins of the world took away sin for those being saved and suffered separation from His heavenly Father in Sheol as punishment (Isaiah 53; Matt 12:39–40; Heb 2:9; Acts 2:22–36). Then came the ***third*** change, the Father raised Jesus up in a newness of life cleansed of all of our sin (1 John 2:1–2, 29; 3:5), in a new resurrected form. After suffering for all humanity, Jesus would never die again (Heb 6:20; 7:24–25). Jesus took on ***the completed state of the Creation*** (Col 1:15–18), ***a perfected spiritual humanity***, and now is working to bring as many as listen home to be eventually completed in a similar state (Phil 3:20–21; 1 John 3:1–2).

As we consider Jesus' physical-spiritual make-up (ontology) after the resurrection (1 Cor 15:1–9), we note that Jesus could walk through walls (John 20:19, 26), He could change His appearance (Luke 24:13–35; Mark 16:12), people could touch His body and feel substance (Luke 24:39; Matt 28:9; John 20:17), He could eat food (Luke 24:41–43; John 21:12–15), and He could

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ascend in that body from this realm into the very presence of His spiritual Heavenly Father (Acts 1:9). The capabilities of the resurrected body are awesome transcending the physical and directly interacting with the spiritual. All who faithfully follow Jesus will have a resurrected body with their own unique personal features but similar in nature to Jesus' resurrected body. They will have the same abilities to operate in both a material and spiritual world simultaneously within the new heavens and earth to come.

This is why we are going to be able to be an intimate part of God's family. God has promised those who follow Christ that they will be transformed into the same state as Jesus' final transformation. Nothing will divide God's children. In addition, as socially responsible family members, each will take on their assigned responsibilities and corresponding authority (Rev 3:21).

This is why Heaven is going to be so great. Have you ever considered what it would be like to live somewhere where everyone loved you to the point that you did not ever have to worry about somebody trying to hurt you spiritually, mentally, or physically. In heaven, to use an earthly phrase, "we will have each other's backs," and we will not be hiding from God because of our shame of doing wrong and hurting others (sin). We will become fully transparent no longer being afraid of what others might do in the future to hurt us, and we will joyfully serve one another as we take on our assigned responsibilities. We will all be serving one another in perfected love without any sin under the lordship of the Father and Son. We will be living in a world where our Heavenly Father and Eldest Brother have saved us from the bondage and corruption of sin in order that we may experience a perfect life of love, joy, and peace with them and one another (Rom 8:21, 35; 1 Cor 2:7-9; Gal 5:22-23).

Heaven is going to be great! It will not be great because of how great the physical and spiritual realm will be but because we will finally be able to know God perfectly and be in His presence forever. At this point in time, we can only imagine what it will be like to speak in casual meaningful conversations with our Heavenly Father, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and all who ever obediently listened to God over the ages. Although it seems too good to be true, those of us who are following Christ are looking

forward to that day when we will actually realize our close relationship with God and one another.

For those of you who have not really committed to following Jesus up to this point in your lives, I want to encourage you to journey with me a little further and seriously consider following Jesus. Although many who are not following Jesus know that something is wrong and desire something better, Satan has been deceiving them into thinking that they cannot change.<sup>20</sup> ***This is a lie!*** God gives everyone multiple chances to turn to Him and obediently follow Him and His way of life. ***It is God who helps Christ's followers change.***

God is worthy of our submission. If you come to that conclusion and desire to become part of His eternal intimate holy family, we will pray together to receive Him into your life prior to finishing this book. If you are already following Jesus, I pray that the rest of this book will encourage you to let go of your personal control over the things that God should control and commit to following Jesus to the best of your ability. When you do so, you will gain much more than you gave up, and you will start to experience godly excitement, joy, and inner peace.



## Spiritual Awakening: Coming to Our Senses

Right now, take a moment, close your eyes, and consider the following scenario. Imagine yourself on the northeast shore of Japan at Honshu on Friday in the early evening of March 11, 2011 when a nine point earthquake struck the region, the largest recorded in history. Just minutes after the quake settled, the coastal area was hit by a thirty foot tsunami wave. You have been on vacation sitting on the beach contemplating life when all of a sudden the earth started shaking violently and all of the buildings behind you disintegrate. Before you can get over the shock from the effect of the earthquake itself and respond to the screaming, you hear a great roaring sound, turn back toward the sea, and see a thirty foot wave descending on you. What do you say to God at that moment? With imminent danger, would you be resigned to any outcome with a sense of inner peace, knowing that if you died, you would immediately leave your physical body and meet God face-to-face, or would you be overcome with a sense of hopelessness?

Have you ever had a dream in which everything happening within the dream felt so real that you were surprised when you awoke and realized that it had all been a dream? In a very similar way, when anyone starts listening to God, he or she starts realizing that there is more to the world around them than meets the eye. God does not allow us to interact directly with the spiritual world that is directly interconnected to our physical world, but He gives us awareness. Within our physical world, God teaches all about godly social interaction and asks all to consider choosing life with Him for eternity (Rev 3:20; 21:1–4; 22:1–5).

Although we are not given the ability to interact directly with the spiritual world around us, those who listen to God are taught to understand that many of the battles that we personally experience are spiritually based and can be won *only* through His

assistance (Eph 6:10–18). The physical world is affected by the spiritual and visa-versa. In the present, we affect the spiritual world through our actions in the physical world and through our prayers as God and His Heavenly Host defend righteousness in both worlds. For those who listen to God, the reality of a future spiritual world– divided into two isolated regions called Heaven and Hell–becomes the main focus even as we live out our physical lives in the here-and-now (1 Peter 1:3–9; 2:9–10. Phil 3:17–4:1). *Our world is temporary and the future sinless Heaven and sinful Hell are permanent.*

***From the beginning of the Creation, God has asked everyone to make choices.*** Originating from Adam and Eve’s sin of partaking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, all are born into sin and forced to experience both good and evil. We learn from both and then must choose to obey or disobey, to follow God or our self-centered ways. It has been part of God’s creative design to give all a fairly large amount of free-will in order to allow each person to decide if he or she desires to join Him and others in holy living. God does not stand over His creation as a hovering parent forcing everyone to do what is right. Through the Holy Spirit’s teaching, God works with our individual consciences and shows us the advantages of living holy lives with Him in peace and joy.

God’s gracious work in our lives causes many to rebel openly against Him and His holy way of life (Rom 5:8–10). But God is persistent not wanting any to perish but all to come to a place in life where they willingly turn to Him looking for a change from focusing on self and family to following Him and acquiring His concern for all (2 Peter 3:9). We learn from the good and evil around us, and God keeps asking us to turn away from living for self and submit to Him and become part of His eternal close-knit holy family. Everyone should willingly submit to God’s authority because of His great love for all, but many choose their own lordship over His with the loss of long term inner peace and joy and loss of a future life in Heaven with Him.

Today, some think that God loves us so much that He will not allow anyone to reject Him and go to Hell or that going to Hell will be temporary and just feel like an eternity. ***This is wrong!*** Without submission to God, people will be confined in the future

to an isolated place, a prison, called Hell with no contact with God and His righteous followers forever. *Everyone's choice matters!*

### **Free-will Is Critical**

God created everyone free to make choices that have eternal consequences and will not force His way of life on any. It is clear from Scripture that God would like everyone to learn to trust Him and choose to live with Him for eternity (John 3:16, 19–20), but He knows that many will not (Matt 7:13–14). He consistently encourages everyone to look beyond themselves and choose a life of peace and joy with Him and others who want the same thing. There will come a time that God will not allow those who will not follow Him to make life miserable for those who do (Rev 22:14–15).

Others think that God would not really allow anyone to make such a significant choice as to either accept or reject Him eternally, but He does. Prior to the physical creation, God already knew what was going to happen every second of every day of the Creation with every individual born into it (Eph 1:4). His creation is based on foreknowledge, knowing in advance what will happen (1 Peter 1:1–2; cf. Rom 8:28–30).

A simplified analogy to God's spiritual ability can be seen through what we can do in our physical world. God has given us the ability to design projects such as cars, houses, bridges, etc. knowing in advance how our designs will turn out. God has given humanity this basic mental ability. On a much grander scale, God has the capability to design a universe knowing in advance how His Creation with intelligent beings will turn out. God knew in advance who would choose to listen to Him and become part of His eternal close-knit holy family and who would not (1 Peter 1:1–2).

God knew who would be born, and when, and how each person in His creation would live out his or her life. God also knew in advance how He was going to work with each person encouraging them to turn from evil and self-centeredness to Him for guidance and leadership. Based on His knowledge of what each person of the Creation would do, He decided prior to physically

creating the universe who would be allowed to be part of His eternal Kingdom and Family and who would not. Although God desires all to become part of His family, He allows everyone's final decision to receive or reject Him to determine where each will spend eternity (Jer 20:12; Luke 8:17; 16:15; 2 Thess 2:10).

In reality, God invites all, but only a few are chosen depending on their response to His call. Jesus told one parable that clearly helps us understand all Scripture regarding this matter. God is filling His Kingdom and eternal family by inviting all, but *if one wishes to enter His Kingdom, they must follow God's will and become like Christ* (Matt 7:21; Gal 3:26–27). If they do not, they will be turned away (Matt 22:1–14). This is why Jesus warns all that if they are not willing to listen to Him and do His will, they are *not able* to be His followers (Luke 14:26–33; cf. Matt 10:38). Everyone who desires to be a member of God's family must put God first and follow His leadership (Luke 14:26).

***In reality, our choices matter!*** God's teachings are consistent in both the Old and New Testament. What people decide during their earthly life matters. The writer of Hebrews said that it is appointed for each of us to *die once* and then *a judgement* will follow (Heb 9:27; Rev 20:11–15). There is *no reincarnation!* All people live this physical portion of their eternal life *only one time*, and all will be judged according to the way that they responded to God during this short portion of eternity (1 Peter 1:17). Everyone who learns to trust and obey God because of His great love for all will become part of His eternal close-knit holy family and given assignments (e.g. Jer 1:5; Gal 1:15–16; Eph 2:10).

Although it may be hard to believe, the hardest part of life for most people is ***just waking up*** to the reality of the spiritual world around them. If we do not let God teach us, ***our own personal desires are like little children's and cloud our reasoning*** blinding us to what is really going on. In addition, Satan's deceptive work continually bombards us with all types of diversions and busyness.

*Our self-centered desires combined with Satan's deceptions and busyness combine to produce a mental and spiritual smokescreen keeping many from coming to know reality.* At times, God breaks through that smokescreen and reveals Himself. *Through His revelation, we come to realize how empty*

our lives are without a close relationship with Him and that He has many faithful followers working worldwide to bring as many as will listen into His eternal presence.

God brings bits of reality into all people's lives through evangelists, preachers, teachers, family members, friends, associates, and even strangers, who utilize all types of media including pamphlets, magazines, books, phones, computers, i-Pods, i-Pads, radio, TV, and other forms. He asks all to read His Word, the Bible, in order to dispel the darkness around them allowing them to see reality, which in turn frees them from their own sinful bondage (John 8:31b–32f).

Billy Graham once wrote about a young lady who had written him a letter and told him how totally miserable she had been in her former free-spirited life. She had been pursuing the sensual pleasures of this world but found neither inner peace nor lasting joy from them. Through God's guidance, she decided to go to a Bible study and stump everyone with her cynicism. Instead, God used that time to build an interest in her to read His Word. She began studying a Bible on a regular basis and several months later God brought her to a point where she realized that God really loved her and had a much better plan for her life than she had for herself. At that point, she submitted her life to her loving Creator. She said in her letter that after committing to follow Christ, she experienced a happiness that she did not know existed. She stated that all those sensual pleasures were traps that had led her to confusion, unhappiness, guilt, and near-suicide. Now she was truly free as she followed Christ.<sup>21</sup>

### **There Are No Passes into Heaven!**

If we would be honest with one another, most of us would admit that we want things our way and want everything to be as easy as possible. From what I see from God's Word, it takes commitment and effort in order for anything to advance, whether good or evil. From the side of evil, Scripture is clear that Satan has been and will continue to work hard to overthrow God and His children until he is permanently confined in Hell after Christ's thousand year reign. He will not win, but he is putting as much

effort into bringing as many of God's children with him as possible. From the side of good, Scripture is clear that God has been longsuffering and working hard on humanity's behalf from the very beginning. The Son of God, Jesus Christ, working with His Father even died both physically and spiritually in order to provide a way for good to triumph eternally. Through Jesus' spiritual death on our behalf, He was separated from His intimate relationship with His Heavenly Father *for the first time* in order that those who were trusting God would never experience spiritual death even for one second (John 11:25–26; Eph 4:8–10; Heb 2:9–11). Jesus provided a way to undo wrong and gives those who submit to God a righteousness like His own (Gal 3:13–14; 2 Cor 5:21). Any real advancement, whether good or evil, takes commitment and effort.

If all advancement takes commitment and effort, why do so many think that God, who is fighting on our behalf, wants His children to sit on the sidelines and do nothing? Everything in Scripture teaches that God's children are to be fully involved in living holy lives and allowing God to lead them in righteous works overcoming evil with good. Yet there are many people who claim to be Christians (Christ-like), who do not live according to God's holiness nor try to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. These same people will tell you that *they are confident that they are going to Heaven when they die*. This way of thinking is totally contrary to God's Word. ***Nowhere in Scripture does God teach that someone can come to Him, pick up a pass into Heaven, ignore the battles going on around them, die physically, and have Jesus escort his or her spirit into Heaven.***

So ***why*** do so many people today make some sort of profession of faith—saying that they trust God and either were baptized as an infant or after professing Christ as savior—and never experience the new creation “in Christ” (2 Cor 5:17)? In reality, without a genuine commitment ***to follow*** Jesus Christ, there will be no spiritual birth into God's family nor corresponding new creation.

*Satan has sold the world one of His biggest lies since the beginning of the Creation. Today, there are many who believe that salvation is nothing more than obtaining a pass into heaven to use when one dies.* This lie causes people to think that they

have to wait until they get to Heaven for anything to be better. ***What a lie!*** Sanctification, being molded and shaped by God, and good works starts immediately *for all who truly start following Jesus* (Rom 6:22).

*Today, Satan's latest major lie, which is being spread by many, is as bad as or worse than the one that he perpetuated in the Middle Ages that caused a major reformation among Christians.* At that time, Satan had perpetuated a lie within a part of the Church originating from a misunderstanding of Scripture such as Matt 16:17–19. Satan's lie deceived many into thinking that they could pay church officials for forgiveness of sins for themselves and/or loved ones including the deceased, thereby giving them passes out of purgatory (Sheol) into Heaven.

This ***new lie***, *which is being propagated by many proclaiming that everyone can pick up a pass into heaven by confessing their sins and claiming Jesus as their savior without following Him as lord*, is hindering many from considering a genuine commitment to follow Jesus Christ. It is only through a turning from self and following Jesus (repentance) that one is saved from judgement as a sinner and spiritually born into God's family. ***Spiritual renewal only comes from God according to His will and His rules*** (John 1:13; 2 Peter 3:9). Through spiritual birth into God's family comes the removal of sin and growth in God's righteousness. God's Word is clear, *if individuals do not make true commitments to follow Jesus, they cannot be His disciples* (Luke 14:26–27; Matt 10:38). Without making a true commitment to follow Jesus, there is no spiritual birth into God's eternal holy family. Heaven is only open to God's children, His faithful angels, and His heavenly beings (Rev 21:7–8, 27).

Satan's contemporary lie is worst than His first to Eve in the sense that her decision did not condemn her and the rest of the world *eternally*, but Satan's current lie has eternal consequences for those who listen to him instead of God. Satan's latest distortion of truth has given many ***a false sense of eternal security***, and thereby many who are even regular church attendees are living like the rest of the world and not actively following Christ.

When those who do not attend church on a regular basis look at many of our contemporary churches, they do not see a holy witness where godly love is at work among God's people.

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Therefore, we are suffering from a double blow from Satan's present lie:

- (1) many going to church are *neither being saved nor growing spiritually*; and
- (2) many outside the local churches have no desire to know about God because Christianity appears to be a social club where people help one another feel justified before God through association but are no more concerned for others more than anyone else.

This ungodly activity is breaking God's heart! It is a terrible witness against God from many who are claiming Christ as their savior. Satan's great lie is being perpetuated more and more in our contemporary world giving many a false hope that everyone is going to Heaven. This ungodly activity ***is corrupting God's Gospel Message in such a way that people are not encouraged to find an off ramp from the wide-road leading to destruction.*** It is causing many to live out their lives in an empty state instead of being born of the Spirit and joining God in His ongoing Creation.

### God Is at Work

Part of the Good News is that God is always at work helping all to understand the reality of the spiritual world as well as the physical. *Everyone senses both* through what they see in the physical world (Rom 1:18–22; 2:11–16; John 3:19–20), but it is only through their willingness to listen to the Creator that anyone is able to start to understand the spiritual (John 3:21; Acts 22:14a; 1 Cor 2:10, 16). Through that understanding, one is also able to understand more fully the physical world. It is sad that for most, God has to allow bad things to happen in order to get their attention. It seems that when things are going well according to our way of thinking, we do not have the time nor desire to listen to God even when we are not experiencing the type of full life that God desires for us (Rev 3:17–18). Yet, God remains persistently working with all to awaken those who listen. The Holy Spirit is always actively working in the hearts and minds of all to teach

reality (Rom 2:11–16; John 16:8–11). Sometimes God gets our attention during quiet moments, sometimes through miraculous events, sometimes through tragedies including near death experiences, and in many cases through everyday experiences.

Job is a good example of this type of thought. Job was a righteous man respecting God (Job 1:1, 8), but did not know God well. In addition, although he was an upright man before God, he—like the rest of creation—fell short of doing God’s will perfectly (Rom 3:23). God allowed Satan to torment Job through trial after trial (Job 30:25–31). When the time was right and Job had commended his own righteousness long enough (Job 27:6), God introduced Himself in a very personal way and brought Job to the point of acknowledging his own sinfulness. Like Isaiah (Isa 6:1–7), when Job realized that he had sin in his life, he repented and committed to following God’s ways more fully (Job 38:1–40:4–42:6). In many ways, although our trials are not normally as severe as Job’s, our life struggles are similar and God uses them to build our character just as he did Job’s—if we listen (Rom 5:3–5).

Although the spiritual forces at work around us cannot be observed through our physical senses alone, some of their evil is discernable through God’s illumination. If we do not allow God to work with us and illuminate the reality of the co-existing physical and spiritual worlds, we remain ignorant of the spiritual battles raging around us as Satan fights to destroy the souls of each person. It is critically important for all to submit whole-heartedly to the lordship of the Creator. This gives God permission to train and empower each to be part of His eternal holy family.

***The greatest spiritual battle that every individual has to face is whether he or she will allow God to awaken him or her from the dreamlike state in which he or she lives.*** In reality, it normally feels safer and more comfortable to stay in this dreamlike state than to wake up. This state is somewhat like an altered state of consciousness wherein each individual has found a familiar place within a certain group of friends and activities to avoid the unknown whether good or bad. It could be compared to a heroin addict who escapes from his or her physical and emotional pain of this world. Once someone has been on heroin for awhile, he or she becomes addicted to and dependent on that numbed state that

awakening to a world without heroin is very uncomfortable mentally and physically as the body has to adjust back to feeling.

Allowing God to awaken us to the reality of the existing spiritual world that permeates and influences our physical world can be just as traumatic as getting off drugs. God consistently works with us to awaken us to the reality of our spiritual as well as our physical world and the consequences of our ongoing decisions.

In our physical world, various forms of busyness are the worst barriers to understanding God and the spiritual world in which we live. King Solomon is a good case in point. As a king, he was very intelligent from the world's perspective and did well: he built up his cities and armies in order to protect himself and his people from the world around them (1 Kings 4:20–28; 10:14–29; Eccl 2:1–10), but he failed to build up his personal and national spiritual strength (1 Kings 11:1–13). At the end of his life, he realized that his busyness in the physical world was not very important when considered in light of eternity. He came to realize very late in life that the most important part of anyone's life was to respect God and allow Him to develop and lead all who listen to a place of hating evil and loving Him (Eccl 3:14; 12:13–14).

For those who listen, God starts them on a path within a much bigger world than first realized. Those who allow God to awaken them start realizing a need to reevaluate past presuppositions and make appropriate adjustments in order to realize a proper relationship with God and others. Their consciousness of the true world starts shifting from one that had been very self-centered to one that becomes more and more in tune with God, His standards, and His Creation. God is bringing as many as possible into alignment with His holy nature—producing an eternal life for those who listen, that is full of love, joy, inner peace, and excitement.

For all who allow God to awaken them from their personal, self-centered, and delusional worlds and start learning and obediently trusting the Creator of the universe, they eventually come to the point of realizing that:

- (1) life is truly eternal for all with good or bad eternal consequences depending on choices made during this part of eternity;

- (2) those, who obediently listen to God during this part of eternity, will be transformed into perfected sinless individuals in Christ's moral image; and
- (3) those who obediently listen to God will live with Him and other perfected children forever in Heaven in His eternal close-knit holy family experiencing godly love, joy, and inner peace.

### **Born To Die Once**

Just as it is determined (appointed) for men to die once, but after this judgement . . . . Heb 9:27

A long time ago, there was a king who wanted God to help him remember that he had a limited time to live out his physical life. It would help him stay focused on what was important in life (Ps 39:4–5). Like all of us, King David knew that he had a limited time to live out this part of eternity. He wanted to keep a proper perspective regarding his limited time in order to live out this part in a way that was pleasing to his Creator (Ps 103:33–105:5).

From the moment that anyone is physically conceived, he or she has an eternal existence. Then, God begins developing those who listen as eternal holy family members throughout this physical stage of their eternal life. The Creation is in process and will continue bringing people into God's eternal family until the last day of Jesus' thousand year reign. During this time, everyone has the ability to receive the gift of the Spirit and corresponding eternal life through submission to God. If individuals will walk in God's ways (holiness) and follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, they will be born a second time. This time they are born into God's eternal family through the eternal indwelling of the Holy Spirit (John 3:1–8; Eph 1:13–14; 1 John 4:7).

In Scripture, holy writers have used various terms such as God's "call, choice, or election" to denote those who have been born of God due to their submission to Him. It is God's love that draws many to Him. God's Word also makes it clear that no one is allowed to bring character witnesses before Jesus to speak on their behalf at His great White Throne Judgement. He has perfect

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knowledge of everyone's inner motives and completed actions and exposes everything to the whole Creation (Luke 8:17; Rev 20:11–15; cf. 2 Thess 2:10).

### **Born into Sin on the Wide-Road Leading to Destruction**

As we consider God's Creation, we can make a few observations:

- (1) everyone was created as an eternal being without having a say in the matter;
- (2) everyone other than Adam and Eve was born into a world corrupted by sin traveling through life on the wide road to destruction with marred characters; and
- (3) everyone who wants to live with God as part of His eternal close-knit holy family must submit to His lordship.

So, how marred are we, and why would anyone want to submit to God's lordship?

God tells us not to love the fallen corrupted world nor the various ways of the world because they are not of Him (1 John 2:15), and they will not last (2 Peter 3:7–13; Rev 22:1). He describes the ways of the world as based on self-centeredness vs. a God-centered love for all. God's Word is clear: a self-centered life style leads to eternal pain and suffering, but for those who *willingly* live according to God's will and ways, there is eternal life with God and inner peace and joy that starts immediately (Rom 6:22).

Let's take a deeper look at the prodigal son. As we look at Christ's teaching about a loving father and *two* self-centered sons (Luke 15:1–2, 11–32), we note a couple important points:

- (1) the loving father worked hard to provide for his family and workers. He did not live in the moment but instead lived his life based on genuine love in such a way as to bless others *over the long haul*;

(2) the openly rebellious younger son was not concerned with others nor the future. When he became old enough to be on his own, he left home to live his life in such a way as to experience as much worldly pleasure as possible not considering how that would affect his future; and (3) *the second son*, who was also highlighted in Jesus' story, demonstrated a certain degree of faithfulness to his father by staying at home and helping to maintain their land, but *was just as distant from God as the younger son* because of his lack of genuine love for others especially his lost brother.

In reality, Jesus' story closes with two lost sons, who have experienced love from their biological father and had not yet allowed God to grow genuine love and concern in them. One son came home repenting because of what his father had to offer, and the other who stayed at home was living legally within his father's moral criteria but not from the heart.

When Jesus closed this story, He did not say whether either son had a genuine love for their father or others. It is possible that eventually both having experienced totally different circumstances would eventually come to the place of allowing God to teach them to love others according to His standards. If they did not, neither would be allowed into God's eternal family. Allowing God to lead and teach each of us to love Him and others more and more is crucial to becoming part of His eternal holy family (Matt 5:43–48; 22:37–40; Luke 10:30–37).

When we consider Jesus' story, it is important to take note that Jesus is talking to Pharisees (Luke 15:1–2). The Pharisees are known to be morally good and can be compared to many of our contemporary church members. Many church members today have good morals but are lacking a genuine concern for others. It is a good and noble thing to follow God's moral laws faithfully, but without genuine love and concern for others, one is missing what is most important (1 Cor 13:1–8a).

*How many of us, who go to church regularly and try to follow God's general commandments, have no real compassion for the lost?* In reality, both sons' lifestyles were ungodly, and those following either one have no place in God's eternal holy family. If

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we do not have a genuine love for others, let's ask God to reveal Satan's deception and our own self-centered desires so that we might make a heart-felt decision to turn to God and learn to love more fully. No one is truly a part of God's family unless he or she is allowing God to mold and shape his or her image into one similar to His (Matt 5:3–12; Gal 5:22–23).

Jesus makes us vividly aware that the ability to know good and to do good comes only from our Heavenly Father (Matt 19:17; Luke 18:19; John 20:17). He is the One who is good and all goodness flows from Him. Therefore, we need the Creator to help us evaluate our motives for everything that we do. Anytime that we consciously or subconsciously place ourselves, our families, or other organizations above others, we no longer see the world as God intended.

God's way of life and standards are high but rewarding. The only way to realize any true godly love, which produces inner peace and joy, is to live out our lives listening to God and living according to His standards. He is worthy of our submission as lord due to His great love and concern for us. God wants us to realize a good life and helps all who listen to Him learn to love as He loves (John 13:34; 15:10–13).

### ***The Righteousness of God***

But now apart from law, the righteousness of God has been manifested being witnessed by the Law and the prophets. The righteousness of God is (realized) through faith in Jesus Christ—for all who are trusting, because there is no distinction for all have sinned and are falling short of the glory of God—being made righteous (justified) freely by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.

Rom 3:21–24

### **The Consequence of Sin**

God teaches us through Paul that the Law was weak on account of the flesh, our fallen self-centered nature (Rom 8:3). In

other words, our selfish desires are at times able to override the holy spiritual desires that God implants into our hearts resulting in sin and consequential death. Scripture teaches us clearly that the actual penalty for any sin, any act that disobeys God's instructions for life, is death, separation from God and His eternal close-knit family. We have been created to be part of God's eternal intimate family, but because of sin, we are separated from that very family.

During Moses' day, God taught those who would follow Him that they had to live holy lives: lives that were distinct and separate from those who were not walking in His ways. Israel agreed to follow God and was commanded to be a holy nation manifesting God's true caring nature to the entire world (Ex 19:5–6). They were to be a light to the world just as Christ's followers are today. God does not allow sin to disrupt His holy way of life. Therefore, He does not allow sin to exist in those who choose to live in His eternal presence. God with His righteous nature does not allow the co-existence of good and evil in His immediate presence. That is why Scripture teaches us over and over again that God is holy and demands that we, His created children, strive for holiness (Lev 19:1–2; 1 Peter 1:14–19).

### **All Are Sinning**

Because our Heavenly Father is holy and will not allow sin to exist in close proximity to Him, Paul declared emphatically that “the wages of sin is death [Rom 6:23]!” By the time that he had encountered the Risen Lord and walked under the leading of the Holy Spirit for several years, Paul also stated emphatically that “all have sinned and are falling short of the Glory of God [Rom 3:23].” This was a change of thinking for Paul, who in his earlier years believed along with many of his countryman that they could live their lives zealously for God following the guidelines of the Law and be saved without the atoning work of the suffering Messiah (Isa 52:13–53:12; Rom 9:30–10:4). The author of Hebrews made the bold statement that the blood of bulls and goats had been pointing to what God's Son was going to do and that sin had not been removed by their sacrifices; it was removed through Christ's (Heb 9:23–10:14).

After his encounter with the risen Lord, Paul came to understand that he and his zealous countrymen had not really understood the necessity of God performing a costly miracle stemming from His righteousness to remove sin from their lives (Rom 1:16–17; Phil 3:4–11; 2 Cor 5:21). In God’s economy, sin had to be removed like bad cancer cells, not covered. When we begin to understand how righteous God really is and how sinful we really are, we can make this personal by joining Isaiah and saying with him, “Woe to me, because I have been cutoff (from God) because I am a man of unclean lips . . . (I know this because) my eyes have seen the King, YHWH (who is leader) of the (Heavenly) Hosts (who is holy, holy, holy) [Isa 6:3, 5].”

### A Real Problem

Well, as we begin to understand that God does not allow anyone with any sin in His eternal presence, we begin to understand that we have a real problem. Sin causes separation from God (Isa 59:1–8; Rom 6:23). We begin to understand that God is holy and that He will not allow *any* individuals who are sinning to enter into His eternal presence because *sin is not acceptable. It is like cancer*. If unchecked it will bring death to godly relationships starting with our relationship with God. Yet, we know that God has created us to be with Him in close proximity as close-knit family members for eternity. In addition, we realize that although God gave us the written Law through Moses as one of His many acts of grace, neither the Law nor our obedience has saved anyone because of *our failure* to live out the requirements of the Law perfectly.

To live in God’s immediate presence, there must be *no* sin with its resulting destruction to perfect relationships. *We come face-to-face with the reality that without God’s help, we would all face the second death spoken of in Revelation 20:11–15* (cf. Gal 3:24). Without God’s intervention, we would all be separated from Him for eternity. Without His help, no one would be allowed to live with Him as an eternal, intimate family member. There would be no eternal peace for anyone.

*Justification: Becoming Holy Like God*

As we reflect on God's supreme righteous act of love on our behalf, the death of His Anointed One, the Messiah, Jesus, we come to realize that although the Father suffered great agony over His Son's rejection and death, both knew that they were making *the only way possible* for us to be reconciled to them forever.

***God's death was necessary*** to remove all sin from those who learned to trust Him (John 3:14–15; cf. Isa 53; 2 Cor 5:21). In God's economy, the penalty for transgressing others had to be satisfied in such a way that all sin is removed and eternally eradicated. If any of God's creation was going to live with Him, ***justification, being made righteous without sin, was required; it was not optional*** (John 3:14–17; 2 Cor 5:21).

When someone starts to become aware of God's holiness and his or her own sinfulness, there may be a personal desire to clean up one's life prior to submitting to God. The problem is that without God's help, no one is able through his or her own sin corrupted strength to achieve *perfect* holiness. That is why our Heavenly Father took matters into His own hands and provided a way through His Son's death to remove our sins and renew our character according to His holy likeness. It is God's righteous work (Rom 1:16–17)—not our own—that ultimately has the ability to transform us into holy beings suitable to live with Him and one another in His Heavenly Kingdom. Through the miracle of Jesus' death on the Cross, His followers have ***all sin removed and are given God's righteousness in exchange*** (2 Cor 5:17; 1 Peter 2:24).

I have personally seen many over the years continually reject God's invitation into His family, because they wanted to wait until they had their lives more in tune with His holiness. I know that no one is able to straighten out his or her life enough to approach God without repentance. The Good News is that no one has to. God just wants us to desire to live holy lives and make a commitment to follow Him and His ways. He does the rest. *It is God who shapes and empowers us so that we may start living godly lives in the here-and-now* (Acts 1:8; Rom 8:14; Gal 5:22–23).

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With this in mind, let us grasp anew the meaning of reconciled sonship as described in Romans 8:28–30. Our Heavenly Father is telling us that *if* we learn to love Him because of His great love for us:

- (1) we are *called* (chosen) because of our responding love, and in that calling, God will help us to mature more and more into the likeness of Jesus with His pure level of grace and righteousness (James 1:12);
- (2) we are *justified*: our sins are removed through a great miraculous work of God, who accepted our sins as His sins, and in exchange for our sins, He has given us His righteousness (cf. Rom 3:21–28; Gal 3:13; 2 Cor 5:17–21); and
- (3) we are *glorified*, given full-sonship and eventual perfect moral character matching Jesus' sonship and character (c: cf. John 17:23, 26; Rom 8:14–17; 1 John 3:1–2).

As we learn to love, trust, and obey Jesus, we begin to stand upon our Father's promises. As we walk with God, we start to develop a trust for His perfect plan for a godly family and corresponding peace and begin looking forward to the day that we will be in Heaven with Him. As we join God in His Great Work and allow Him to develop us over time, we come to realize that we will not reach perfection during this portion of our eternal life, but *we trust God to complete our transformation* (Phil 1:6). As He continually softens our hearts, we become more and more compassionate toward others. We take great comfort in knowing that in the not-so-distant future, we will have our sins totally removed, we will be conformed perfectly into Christ's moral image (Rom 8:29; 1 John 3:1–2), and we will enter God's immediate presence where there will be no more pain nor sorrow (Rev 21:1–7).

### Spiritual Awakening: Coming to Our Senses

. . . there was a great famine . . . and he desired to eat his fill . . . and coming to himself (his senses)

... and arising, he went to his father.

Luke 15:14–20

Have you ever sensed that God had been or presently is saying to you, “Arise my love”? God is constantly asking people and nations to wake up, understand the consequences of sin, and begin living holy lives with Him (Isa 60:1–3). In Jesus’ day as in every era, most people stay busy building their own relationships and estates, but too much busyness is counterproductive in developing relationships with the Creator and other people. As we discussed earlier, whether it is technological distractions, general entertainment, perversions, perverted relationships, work, or just busyness in general, one should not allow busyness to sidetrack them from listening to God. Through the Holy Spirit’s work and Jesus’ leadership, God uses His faithful people of every generation to awaken those who are spiritually slumbering through personal contact and all types of media including pamphlets, magazines, books, radio, TV, E-mail, i-Pods, i-Pads, and the list goes on and on and on. He also uses personal crises and other events in the life of each person to either draw people to Him or strengthen those who are already committed to following Him.

Initially, most people do not listen to what God is saying. They only ask God for help in fulfilling their self-centered desires. Not really understanding God, they consider God as a genie who has the capacity to fulfill their every desire. It is through God’s work with all that He is eventually able to bring some to a place where they actually start to care about God and their neighbors (Matt 22:37–40).

Although people constantly ask God for favors, many do not really start to listen to the Creator unless something bad is going on in their lives just as it was for the wayward son portrayed in Luke 15:14–20. Many people do not turn to God unless there is a special need in their lives. God takes these opportunities to reveal Himself and teach the importance of caring about others. While He has peoples’ attention during difficult times, He works in their lives showing them a genuine need for His help beyond their present circumstances. He shows them how much they need help in becoming caring members of an eternal society, the need for removal of sin, and how through His great love, He has provided a

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way through Jesus Christ for each person to become perfect and part of His holy family (John 17:23; 20:17; Eph 4:1–6; Rev 21:3).

For those who start to listen beyond their immediate concerns, God starts guiding them off the wide-road leading to destruction and onto their individual narrow roads with Him. These narrow roads have been assigned not only to lead Christ's followers into eternal life but to guide them into helping others to know Him as well. He consistently stays at their side asking them to allow Him to be more fully involved in their lives (Rev 3:20).

In addition to what God teaches everyone about Himself through His creation as the Holy Spirit illuminates (Rom 1:18–32; 2:11–16), He will ask all who are willing—whether committed to Him yet or not—to learn more about Him through the reading of His Word (Deut 4:1; 30:15–16; Ps 103:17–18; 119:5–12). God has inspired each of the writers of His Word and it profits all who listen (2 Tim 3:16–17). The Holy Spirit will teach *those who have a genuine desire to do what God desires*, and they will eventually come to know the reality of Jesus Christ and His saving work (1 John 2:27; John 7:17).

If you have a desire to know more about God or have made a commitment to follow Christ, you should be reading God's Word on a regular basis and allowing Him to teach you reality, which if followed sets one free from self-centeredness and corresponding sin. Jesus promises that those “remaining” in His Word (*reading and living it out*) will know reality and be set free from sin in doing so (John 8:31b–36).

It is important to *allow God to teach you from His Word instead of doing what many do: **they read into His Word what others have said or what they want it to say*** to fit their existing life style. Many, who do not really want to live holy lives and follow God, either consciously or subconsciously *read into* the Bible what they want it to say, *ignore* parts that cannot be made to fit into their desires for life, and in general *do not allow* God's Word to shape their lives.

Here is the crux of the matter. *Due to Adam and Eve's sin, everyone starts out self-centered desiring things for themselves and their families without much concern for their neighbors.* Everyone starts out like a child with blinders on not fully seeing the bad consequences of their actions. During these **God given**

*moments of awakening* and its corresponding lucidity, everyone must decide whether he or she will return to a familiar but lesser life predominately satisfying personal desires or start obeying God's Word and His leading.

During those lucid moments, everyone has to go through an inner struggle deciding whether or not they are willing to give up temporary worldly pleasures. It is during these lucid moments that individuals realize that God has a better life for them if they are willing to become part of His holy family instead of insisting on having things their own way. Many individuals, who stay focused on themselves, soon revert back to the familiar lesser satisfying life and become self-absorbed soon forgetting the better life that God has shown them (James 1:23–24; Rev 3:15–20).

But, Jesus' true followers are being transformed (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 5:22–23), and they are learning to love others as God loves all (1 John 3:14; 4:16–19). When they die physically, *they do not need a pass* into Heaven from anyone including church leaders because they are God's children. Heaven belongs to God *and* all of His children (John 14:1–3; 17:24; 20:17; Rom 8:17). When they die physically, Jesus will meet them as they leave their bodies and escort them into the presence of their eternal Father (John 14:3; 1 John 3:1–2; Rev 21:3).



## Experiencing Obedient Discipleship

Jesus taught that *everyone's understanding of God and His atoning work on everyone's behalf was limited unless they had a desire to do His will* (John 7:17). As you consider our Heavenly Father's love, do you have a genuine desire to follow Him? Jesus does. Jesus said that doing the will of His Father is what sustained Him even more than food (John 4:34). *Without sin* in His life, Jesus focused on pleasing His Heavenly Father (John 4:34; 8:29). We should do likewise. If we allow God to show us our sin, and then we confess it before Him, He will cleanse us from sin allowing us to return His love and grow in our love for our neighbors (1 John 1:9). Like Jesus, if sin is removed from our lives, we will gladly obey God and learn to love one another (1 John 3:23; 4:7–19; 5:3). Consider Isaiah who after seeing God's holy nature (His glory) and his own sinful fallen nature turned to God for help. After God removed his sin, Isaiah immediately wanted to do God's will and volunteered for a very difficult assignment as a prophet proclaiming imminent upcoming destruction for his countrymen (Isa 6:1–13). *It is clear from Scripture that our relationship with our Heavenly Father and Jesus depends on our level of desire to do His will* (Matt 12:49b–50). *If we will just turn to God with an open mind and heart and start studying and acting on His Word* (John 8:31b–32), *we will start to see His loving glorious nature*. Knowing God more fully should help us want to follow His caring leadership.

## Submission

Have you ever considered the idea that belonging to a certain denomination and/or a certain local church *does not*

provide salvation, a place with God in Heaven? Although there are a fair number of people who subconsciously or consciously think that their membership in a local church or denomination gives them an automatic place in Heaven with God, in reality, it does not. Being in Heaven with God is purely dependent on being part of His eternal close-knit holy family. Family members will be with God; non-family members will not.

As we contemplate Jesus' requirements for those who consider following Him, we come again face-to-face with the reality that God demands that everyone make one critical decision during the mortal portion of their eternal life. ***In order to be with God forever in the New Heaven, each person has to decide prior to death whether or not they will submit to the lordship of a gracious and loving God who is definitely worthy of everyone's love and loyalty.*** The Good News includes the fact that God constantly works among us encouraging all to turn from our self-centered ways to His loving way of eternal life (Rom 1:18–32; 2:11–16; cf. 2 Peter 3:9).

Many of us are so caught up in our own aspirations and desires and have never give serious consideration to eternal good and evil and God's open invitation into His eternal close-knit holy family. Jesus taught an important parable regarding people in His day and their personal busyness. He taught how such busyness lost many a place in God's eternal Kingdom. This parable applies to all ages because there are always those who are just too busy accomplishing personal ambitions or fulfilling personal desires that they do not have time to listen and accept God's invitation into His eternal family and Kingdom (Matt 22:1–14). Jesus' parable has two important points:

- (1) do not put off responding in the affirmative to God's invitation into His eternal holy family because there may come a point in your life where you do not hear God's invitation any further; and
- (2) if you accept His invitation to follow Jesus, God is also asking you *to accept the conditions of that invitation* (putting on proper clothing) which includes denying self (dying to self), picking up your cross daily, and submitting to His lordship.

Just as in the parable, God expects you to act appropriately if you accepted His invitation into His family. If you do not accept the conditions of the invitation, which are clearly stated at multiple places in Scripture—just as in this parable—you will end up being separated eternally from His holy family and sent away to live in the Eternal Lake of Fire, Hell. This breaks God’s heart.

In Jesus’ day, when individuals became disciples (students) of a particular teacher, they would normally live in a close relationship with their teacher emulating both the teacher’s teachings and His way of life. In modern terms, His followers are close *apprentices*. Jesus expects His disciples to emulate Him. He asks all to submit to the Father’s teaching, His leading, and allow them to teach godly love to the point that His followers acquire a godly concern for others. He even asks His disciples to be willing to lay down their lives for one another (John 13:34; 15:12–13). All disciples are expected to suffer according to God’s will in order to be part of His great rescue operation (Phil 1:29–30; Col 1:24–29; cf. Heb 12:1–3). This is all part of the sanctifying process of God.

Following Jesus is not easy, in fact, at times it is difficult and requires hard work, but the rewards are much greater than anything else that we will ever do on this side of eternity. If you are willing and make a genuine commitment to be an active part of God’s family and follow Jesus’ leadership in this grand rescue operation, you will begin to experience great joy as you join God in helping save those whom you personally have come to love through God. *If you have made a genuine commitment to follow Jesus at some time in your life, you will see fruit* due to your love of God and fellow man (Matt 28:18–20; John 15:1–5). The Holy Spirit will be working in you developing your character and helping you to lead others to the Father through Christ (Acts 1:8; Gal 5:22–24).

Let’s talk about trusting God. Hebrews, chapter 11, gives us great insight to the importance of individual faith in God. Faith is trust. In the original Bible language for the New Testament, “faith” and “trust” are translated from the same Greek word, *pistis*. Do we trust God to do what He says in Scripture for others and us personally? Is He trustworthy and capable? God asks all of us to step out in faith and to follow Him not knowing where He will

lead. Hebrews 11 gives us a list of individuals, who despite their trying circumstances trusted and followed God.

When the writing of Heb 11 is matched with the accounts recorded in the Old Testament, we note that each of these individuals *grew* in their faith over time. Each one grew to a place of faith, a place of trust in God and His ability, that even when God asked them to do something very difficult, they did it:

- (1) consider Noah, who built a very large ship to house hundreds if not thousands of animals on dry ground waiting for a massive world wide flood (Heb 11:7);
- (2) consider Abraham, who was willing to give back his and Sarah's only biological son to God after waiting until he was one hundred years old for him (Heb 11:17–19);
- (3) consider Elijah, who went up on Mount Carmel to confront Baal's false prophets in front of Israel knowing from his faith in God that God would not let him nor Israel down (1 Kings 18:16–39); and
- (4) then, consider Jesus, who came into His world incarnate as a new born baby living out His life among sinful hostile people who would eventually crucify Him for doing good and speaking truth. He took on their sin and trusted the Father to remove the sin and raise Him from the dead defeating death for as many as would receive Him (Receive: John 1:12; Rev 3:20. Defeating Death: John 1:29; Phil 2:5–11; Rev 11:15; 12:11; 1 John 2:1–2; 3:5).

I have witnessed God's goodness and saving work in many lives over the last 30 years. The biggest obstacle that I have observed for those who slowed down long enough from their busyness to listen to God is that they were still enjoying life on the wide road that leads to destruction *too much* to submit to Him and His way of life. Part of the Good News is that God is long suffering not wanting any to perish (2 Peter 3:9). He continually gives everyone special spiritual awakenings to draw His children close to Him.

Billy Graham tells us in his autobiography, *Just As I Am*, that at just the right time for him, an evangelist, Dr. Mordecai Ham, got through to him as he preached revival services in his

area. Billy Graham was spell bound as the Holy Spirit spoke through this evangelist and taught him about Heaven and Hell.<sup>22</sup> ***Billy realized through Ham's teaching that he did not have a personal relationship with Christ and could not depend on his relationship with his parents nor his local church to save him from sin.***<sup>23</sup> After struggling over submission, one night Billy Graham went forward and turned his life over to the rule of God.<sup>24</sup> With that decision to submit his life to God's authority, he came to a place of feeling both peace and joy.<sup>25</sup>

Years later, Billy Graham spoke with George W. Bush, who would become our forty-third president. God used that opportunity to help George Bush realize that although the Bible provided good self-improvement tips, that was not the real message of the Bible. The center of life had to shift from self to Christ, who had to become lord of one's life.<sup>26</sup> President Bush said that prior to surrendering his life to God, religion had always been part of his life, but he had not been a Believer, a true follower of Christ.<sup>27</sup>

I know from personal experience, that surrendering to God is serious. I accepted God into my life as a child of eight. It was God's love that drew me to Him at that time. When I was baptized that same school year at the age of nine, God gave me a special gift: he allowed me to feel a little of His love for everyone in the room that day. That blessing helped me later through some of my own personal trials and helped me to become a more understanding minister. But, although I was saved by God's grace at an early age, God still forced me to consider total submission as an adult. Twenty years later at the age of twenty eight on a Sunday evening at church, after wrestling with the idea of *total* submission to God's lordship for months, I came to the place in my life that my knowledge of God's goodness had helped me to come to a place in my trust in God that allowed me to totally submit to His lordship. I prayed telling God that I was now ready to follow Jesus without reserve—to the best of my ability—anywhere He desired me to go.

### Choose Life!

Approximately thirty five hundred years ago, God told Israel, a people who had agreed to follow Him, that He had put before them life and good things and death and bad things depending on how they lived. He went on to tell them that if they would return His love, cling to Him (trust Him), and walk in His ways—obeying His commands, statutes, and judgements, He would bless them in the land that He had given them; they and their descendants would live an abundant life (Deut 30:15–19).

Approximately fifteen hundred years later, God’s Sent Son, Jesus Christ, told Israel and the rest of the World that everyone needed to beware and consider that those taking the easier self-centered road in life would not be entering Heaven (Matt 7:13–14). He explained to Thomas that those who wanted to live with God and others who were holy would need to follow Him and His way of life (John 14:6).

Our Heavenly Father gives us free-will and asks us to *seek* Him for cleansing from the past and development for the future (Matt 6:33; 7:7–8, 14; Luke 11:9–10). In demonstrating His incredible love for us through His *redeeming and reconciling work* on the Cross, God has given us proof of His sincere desire for a mature relationship with us. Because of His righteous nature and great love for us, we should subordinate our will to His and allow Him to develop us *into perfectly compatible members* of His family. God wants to shape us into His moral image so that we can live together in perfect harmony forever. In his book *Christ’s Call to Discipleship*, James Boice reminds us that happiness only comes when we allow God to reorientate our lives to His standards.<sup>28</sup> In order for God to transform our lives, we must die to self and live for Him and one another.

### God Will Not Be Mocked

Beware, God will not be mocked! (Gal 6:7; cf. Luke 8:17; 16:15) Each one of us will end up being judged according to our decisions and actions during this short mortal portion of our eternal

life (Rom 2:11–16; 1 Peter 1:17). Those who listen to God and learn to follow Christ and His teachings become part of His intimate family (Ps 90:12; John 14:21, 23). ***Those who do not will perish.*** They will be separated from God, His immediate family, and all of His Holy Heavenly Host for eternity (2 Peter 3:7–10; Rev 20:11–15).

Jesus teaches us that loving God with all our heart, soul, and mind along with loving our neighbors as ourselves fulfills the intent of the Law—God’s instruction for living (Matt 22:37–40). In fact, Jesus says that He came to fulfill the Law and that nothing of the Law will be removed right up to the time of the final Consummation of the Creation (Matt 5:17–19). Paul taught the Christians of Rome the same thing when he told them that Jesus was the *telos* of the Law, which means that Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s law leading all who are trusting God into righteousness (Rom 10:4).

Although the Law pointed out sin and testified to the coming redeeming work of the Messiah (Rom 3:19–20; Gal 3:19, 24), it in and of itself did not keep anyone from sinning (Rom 3:21, 23; 6:23; Gal 3:21). In fact because of our *rebellious* corrupted nature, it causes many to become even more hostile toward God and sin even more (Rom 5:20). But, by God’s grace, eternal life was made possible through God’s righteous loving action (Rom 1:16–17). Paul says it this way,

But, when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law in order that those who are under the Law may be redeemed, in order that we may receive sonship. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit from His Son into our hearts crying “Abba, our Father.” Gal 4:4–6

Through individuals such as Paul, God teaches all that He is not partial in His love and guidance toward any. Whether one sins and has heard the instruction of God physically or not, all sin has consequences. Paul proclaimed that only those who were doing what God taught would be justified, made righteous (Rom 2:11–13). The Law was given by God’s grace in order to expose sin and lead as many as would listen to Christ (John 1:16–17; Gal

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3:19, 24). Does God’s grace annul the Law? Paul says emphatically, “*no!*” God’s obedient children establish the Law through Christ’s death and leadership (Rom 3:28–31; cf. 7:12).

The Good News for those who are being led by the Spirit is that whenever anyone fails to fulfill the Law, Jesus’ death on the Cross provides removal of sin, which allows Christ’s true followers to enter into God’s presence with a righteousness received from Him (Rom 8:14–17; 10:1–4; 2 Cor 5:21).

### Turning Off the Wide Road That Leads to Destruction

Jesus taught, “Enter in through the narrow gate because wide is the gate and *spacious/easy is the way* that is leading into destruction, and many are entering in through it because narrow is the gate and *troubling/difficult* is the way that is leading into life and few are finding it.” Matt 7:13–14

**Wow!** What a difficult teaching. What makes walking in God’s ways so hard compared to living like most people, and why does God make living with Him so difficult if that is what He desires for His Creation? The bottom line is that God is perfectly holy. His nature is pure love (1 John 4:16), and He wants all to become holy like Him.

Those who truly seek God and His will for their lives will find the narrow path to eternal life through Jesus. Jesus is the *only* Way to the Father—indeed He is the “door” to the Father’s presence (John 10:7; 14:6), and all other so-called paths to God are part of the Broad Path of Destruction, which Satan has deceptively developed over the years as viable alternatives to God’s one and only way through Jesus Christ. The author of Hebrews tells us that Christ, the eternal High Priest, offered Himself as an atoning sacrifice, once for all people of all time (Heb 4:16–5:10; 10:10–14; cf. 1 Peter 3:18).

Because God desires a *free-willed* multi-personal relationship with all, *He does not force anyone to join Him* just as a loving spouse would not force nor coerce a mate to stay with him. But, God warns us that living in selfishness and its

corresponding disobedience and sin leads to eternal separation from Him (the second death). *We must learn to listen to God and do what He asks of us or our separation will become so complete that we will feel extreme emotional pain that is hard to comprehend* (Luke 13:24–28).

### Who Do You Say That I Am?

After teaching His disciples and having them observe Him and participate with Him in ministering to thousands, Jesus asked them who people thought that He was. The general consensus was that most thought that Jesus was a great prophet (Matt 16:14). Then Jesus asked them, “But you, *what* are you saying that I am [Matt 16:15]?” Simon Peter responded that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah, the Anointed One of God, but he did not stop there. He went on to say that Jesus, the Messiah, was also “the Son of the Living God [Matt 16:16].” These are the most important truths that everyone must consider. Who and what is Jesus?

Even prior to Jesus’ death, God revealed Jesus’ identity and upcoming sacrifice through Matthew to the rest of Jesus’ disciples. Satan and his demons knew all along the true identity of Jesus Christ, but they did *not* know about the Father’s plan of redemption through His death (Mark 1:34). *Do not let Satan and his helpers keep you so preoccupied with less important things in life*, that you do not at least come to realize that God loves you more than you can presently comprehend. Our Heavenly Father sent Jesus, the Messiah, into our world to die for us removing our sins and thereby providing us with the one and only way to live with Him forever (John 14:6; Eph 2:11–16).

What I have observed over the last thirty years as a minister of Christ is that receiving Jesus as lord is very difficult for many. Many come to the point of realizing the validity of Jesus’ claim to be the Son of God and savior of the world, but only some have been willing to submit to Christ’s lordship. Without total submission to the lordship of Christ, God does not give spiritual birth into His family.

Even with this understanding, many who come to understand do not commit to following Jesus because they do not

want to give up some of the things that they are currently doing. It is not so much that there is any major sin in their lives, but whatever they are doing takes precedent over accepting God's invitation into His family with its responsibilities.

If you are struggling to submit to Jesus' lordship, I want to stress the fact that Satan works hard to keep as many as possible from understanding how unbiased and good God's love is for all. God asks us to seek Him and know Him, and at the same time, He reveals Himself to as many as will listen. Then when one truly turns his or her life over to Him, God begins a transforming process that produces inner peace and joy that surpasses present understanding (1 Cor 13:9–13; Eph 1:18–20). God liberates His obedient children from sin, which clouds reality and corrupts our closest relationships restricting godly development.

### **Jesus Christ Is the Son of the Living God**

Our eldest brother *is* the Son of the living God (Matt 16:16). He is working in perfect unity with the Father. Yes, Jesus Christ is *not* just another good man *nor* is He just another great prophet. ***Jesus Christ is the son of the Living God*** who helped His father create this *temporary* world in order that ultimately they would create an enlarged eternal close-knit holy family (John 1:3, 10; Heb 1:2). We can learn a lot about our savior and His great qualifications to lead us through Paul's letter to the Colossians. Look at what God teaches us through Paul.

Jesus Christ is the ***Beloved Son*** of the Father who has redeemed us from our sins (Col 1:13–14). Jesus is loved very much by the Father. Jesus is the ***Image of God*** who cannot be seen with human eyes (cf. John 14:7; Heb 1:3), yet we can see the Father's nature by observing Jesus (John 12:45; 14:9). He is the ***Firstborn (Eldest)*** having the rights of the firstborn over every creature (Col 1:15), yet He shares His rights with every one who trusts God (John 1:14; 17:5, 22).

Jesus is the ***Master Craftsman*** creating all things seen and unseen in Heaven and on Earth. We were created through Jesus for fellowship with Jesus (Col 1:16). Jesus is the Word, the Origin, the Source, from which the Creation came. Jesus was before all, ***the***

**Eldest**, and it is *through Him* that all things continue. Literally, Jesus has built the universe and all that is in it and holds it all together (Col 1:17).

Jesus is the **Head** of the Body, the Church (Col 1:18; 1 Cor 12), and sits at the right hand of the Father in power forever (Eph 1:20–21). Jesus is the beginning of resurrected life, the **Firstborn from the Dead**. Because Jesus is the first, the oldest son, and continues to obey our Heavenly Father faithfully, He has the greatest eternal responsibility and corresponding authority over all matters (Col 1:18; Eph 1:22; 1 Peter 3:22; 1 Cor 15:27–28).

Jesus is the **Sinless Reconciler**, reconciling us and *those in Heaven* to the Father through the Cross (Col 1:19–20; 2 Cor 5:17–21). Prior to the Creation, our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ agreed together to make an atonement for our disobedience (Acts 2:23; 3:18; Rev 13:8).

The Father sent Jesus Christ to die on the Cross for all people, and then after His death sentence on our behalf was satisfied, He raised Jesus from the dead and set Him over all powers and authorities in Heaven and on Earth forever (Eph 1:17–2:10). Today, this same Jesus delivers all who come to trust and obey Him from the destructive plotting of the Evil One, Satan, the Devil who was a murderer and liar from the beginning (John 10:10; Rom 10:13; John 8:44).

Jesus *is* the Son of the one true living God. During Jesus' earthly ministry, many Jewish leaders *ignored* His identity and *rejected* His authority *because of their hardened hearts toward God*. Their hearts had become hardened as they took matters into their own hands and stopped listening to God. They would not give up control over their fellow man, which they had wrongfully taken (Matt 21:33–39). Therefore, the Father removed all of their responsibility and corresponding authority including that which He had originally given them (Matt 21:43).

Throughout the centuries following Jesus' earthly ministry, many have continued to *ignore* His identity and *reject* His authority because of hardened hearts. Those who hear and receive Jesus Christ hear and receive the Father. Those who hear and receive Jesus' disciples hear and receive Jesus (Matt 10:40). The Father has and is speaking to all who listen through Jesus, and

presently Jesus is speaking to all who listen through the Holy Spirit, Scripture, and His Body, the Church.

If you are convinced that Jesus is the Son of God but have not submitted to His lordship, pray that God will show you His heart and worthiness as you read further. If you pray for God's guidance, He will reveal Himself to you. You will come to see that He is worthy of your love and obedience, and from there God will encourage you to solidify a genuine commitment to follow Jesus wherever He leads regardless of the consequences.

### **Jesus Is Lord As Well As Savior**

You (Jesus' disciples) are proclaiming me, "*the* Teacher and *the* Lord," and you are speaking correctly, for I am. John 13:13; cf. Luke 6:46

Jesus Christ, who put the entire universe together, has also been appointed by our Heavenly Father to be our primary teacher and leader. He works in His followers through the Holy Spirit to free them from the bondage of sin, which originates from self-centeredness and selfishness (1 John 2:27; John 8:31b–32; 18:37).

Jesus Christ is *not* just another good man. Jesus Christ is *not* just another great prophet. Jesus Christ *is* the son of the Living God who worked in close unity with His Father putting together the total Creation including the heavens, earth, and humanity. Jesus is literally holding the Creation together as He leads those who listen to do the good works that the Father has assigned from eternity past (Eph 2:10). *Jesus is our eternal lord as well as savior (Eph 1:19–21)!*

### **Jesus Alone Provides Access to the Father**

When Jesus said that He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and that no one is able to appear before the Father except through Him (John 14:6), the Sent Son was making it perfectly clear that eternal life with the Father only occurs for those *who are in close association with Him*. In one of His sermons on a

mountain, the apostle Matthew tells us that Jesus stated emphatically that on the Day of Judgement there will be many who will say that they had called Him “lord” and had done many things in His name. Yet, they had never really started obediently listening to His Father nor following Him. They had never really started following His will for their lives. For those individuals, Jesus will declare, “I have never known you; depart from me you who have been working contrary to the Law (the Word of God) [Matt 7:21–23; 12:50; cf. Rom 2:11–16].”

The apostle John not only remembered Jesus saying that He was the *only way* to God, but he also remembered Jesus using the metaphorical image of being *the one and only* “door” declaring that He was the only point of access to the Father (John 10:17). Jesus taught His disciples that those seeking a relationship with God must come through Him in order to be saved,

***I am the door!*** It is through me that if someone enters, he shall be saved—indeed he shall come and go and find pasture. John 10:9

Jesus taught that the way to God was through **obedience**. If one follows the normal course of building their own security without paying attention to God, they are *in reality* still following the broad road that leads to eternal shame and suffering. Obedience to Jesus’ leading is the *one and only* path that leads to eternal life with God, because Jesus is *the only* “gate” and *the only* “door” leading into the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt 7:13–14; Luke 13:24; John 10:7). God tells us this same truth through the apostle Paul as Paul teaches the Gentile Believers that they and their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ have the same access to the Father, which is *through Christ* and was finalized through Christ’s redeeming work on the Cross (Eph 2:18).

God is worthy of our submission and loyalty and so is Jesus Christ (Rev 4:11; 5:8–10). If we did not receive Jesus into our lives as children, submission to Him as an adult is probably the most difficult act of the will that anyone has to face. As an adult, it is hard to give up personal sovereignty and replace it with God’s lordship until one realizes how much God loves everyone and how able He really is to bring those who listen to Him into the

perfected New Heavens and Earth where there will be no more pain, suffering, and sorrow. So what is God asking of us during this present part of our eternal journeys?

### **Denying Self/Dying to Self**

The first point that Jesus made for all who were interested in following Him is that they must allow God to lead and in so doing must die to self (John 12:24–26; cf. Luke 14:26). They must lay aside personal ambitions and follow Jesus. This does not mean that God wants everyone to be a full-time minister, but it does mean that *all of Christ's followers will minister on some level* and that all who follow Jesus will live out their lives under Jesus' lordship and not their own. In his book *Christ's Call to Discipleship*, James Boice stated that earlier followers of Christ would never understand how people today profess to follow Christ and ignore self-denial, which is the very essence of being one of Jesus' disciples.<sup>29</sup>

Those who follow Jesus will not be working out success according to the world's standards but instead according to God's leadership. God asks all of Christ's followers to give of their resources, which include talent, time, and resources. The good news for those who make a genuine commitment to follow Christ is that when they become part of God's eternal holy family, they also become part owner of everything. Although it is not apparent presently, in reality not only do Christ's followers share in Jesus' glory, they are also fellow heirs with Him (John 20:17; Rom 8:17, 28–30).

But, what we own with God is nothing compared to our developing relationship with God and other Saints that brings great inner peace and joy. What we give up in personal success and possible material possessions during this present age to serve God, we gain back more than our minds can possibly imagine both in this present world and in Heaven. In reality, it is the turning away from a self-centered, selfish way of life to God's way of life, that brings great joy and inner peace.

### *Worldly Pleasures & Personal Ambitions*

*In a kind of seductive and deceptive way, Satan deceives many into believing that if they start listening to God, **they will have to give up much more than they will receive in return.*** Many people fail to follow Christ when they are young for this very reason. I have personally seen many who came to understand God's love in some limited way, but failed to grasp the severity of the consequences of not following God's ways and leading for their lives. Just as the Laodiceans, they did not realize how much God would improve their present quality of life, if they would just turn to Him (Rev 3:15–18).

Most of us know that God is asking us to follow His lead and give up some of our personal time and resources in order to help others physically and spiritually, but we do not want to do so. The concept of helping others beyond our own immediate family is foreign to much of the world. The idea of denying self makes no sense to those who do not trust a loving Creator to look out for their best interests.

Jesus taught that those who desire to follow Him must start by “denying” themselves. They must let go of their personal desires of the flesh including success and obediently follow Him out of genuine love for all (1 John 2:15–17; 3:23). For many, Jesus was and still is asking too much. It is amazing how much time can be wasted on being entertained, entertaining, engaging in sports, social networking, doing hobbies, using technology, or just spending extra time with family or friends at the expense of becoming involved with God.

***In reality, it is all about willingness.*** Over time, I have seen some who initially would not follow Christ eventually start following Him and consequently learn to care more about others. As people learn to care about others, they also learn that it brings more joy to give than to receive. *Secondly, when people finally begin to realize that God gives much more than He asks of anyone, it becomes easier to give up control and follow Jesus.*

Considering an extreme case, there was an individual, Bill, whom I had witnessed to many times in the past who did not receive Christ as lord and savior. After not seeing Bill for 10-15

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years, he called me from a hospital room. He was dying from a liver ailment brought about by drinking too much alcohol. So, I went to meet with Him knowing through the Holy Spirit's leading that he had never started following Christ. We spoke for a couple hours and he finally realized at the end of his life that it would be an honor and privilege to follow Jesus.

He repented and asked God's forgiveness because of his worldly life style and committed to follow Christ for the rest of his life knowing that God probably would not heal him physically. God did not heal him physically but healed him spiritually and gave him a peace and joy that was supernatural. Over the next few months, his body slowly shut down. As I watched his final decline, he noticed that I was feeling sad about his physical state, and he told me not to be sad because he was the happiest he had ever been in his life. He had become a child of God, and starting with his own family, he told people about the importance of following Jesus (witnessing) until he died. Through Bill's changed life, I was reminded again of God' grace and the truth of Scripture, which said that *those who receive the living water of God will never thirst again and that the Living Water residing in them, the Holy Spirit, would become a living spring, a source of life, for others* (John 4:14 and 7:38–39).

### ***Repentance: the Final Frontier***

The idea of repentance is translated from various forms of the Old Testament Hebrew words *shuv* and *naḥam* and the New Testament Greek words *epistrephō* and *metanoēō*. Within biblical meaning, it indicates a change of heart, a change of one's life and life style, a turning from self and sin to God's righteous way of life. It is a change of the heart that triggers action. There is a true commitment to stop living for self and start living for God and others. In reality, God knows everyone's heart and true repentance brings about conversion, being spiritually born into God's holy family, which is the work of God and God alone (John 1:12–13). We learn from Scripture that repentance is the last hurdle to overcome. It is the last frontier as individuals come to the place of asking God for forgiveness of sins and "turn" from their personal

self-centered lifestyles to Him and His way of life. ***It is necessary!*** (Matt 3:2; 4:17; Acts 2:38; 20:21)

In 2 Chron 30:9 and Neh 1:9, it is written that if Israel “turned back” to God after serving other gods and being expelled from their land, God would give them grace through their captors and allow them to return to their land. In Jer 18:8, God said that if any nation turned away from doing wickedness, He would relent of their up-coming judgement. God’s response to repentance, individually and corporately, has always been the same. If an individual repents or God’s people as a whole repent within nations, God will make both whole, individuals and/or nations.

In Acts 15:3, the Greek noun *epistrophē* is presently translated as “conversion” by many—it would have been better translated as the “turning” of the Gentiles (toward God). Luke used this word to describe a change of lordship and lifestyle for those Gentiles who had given up their pagan lifestyles to follow Christ. In addition, we see Luke using various verb forms of this noun to describe a “turning” to God by both Jew and Gentile. In Luke 1:16, we see a prophecy given about Jesus, the Christ: He will “turn” many of the Sons of Israel *back* to the Lord, their God. In Acts 11:21, Luke speaks of a connection between believing (trusting) and “turning to” the Lord Jesus. In Acts 14:15, he reports that Paul proclaimed the Good News to all in Lystra in order “to turn them away” from empty-vain things and “turn them to” the Living God.

In Acts 26:19–20, Luke speaks of repentance being part of the process of “turning to” God. He recalled Paul telling King Agrippa that he, Paul, had been obedient to God’s revelation to him, and therefore, he was proclaiming the Good News to many including the Gentiles telling them “to repent and turn to the (one true) God” *doing works* worthy of repentance.

God speaks to all people of all ages about good and evil (Rom 1:18–2:16). ***Biblical conversion occurs through God’s action after one “turns to Him” giving up their own way of life and submitting to Him and His ways.*** A genuine conversion is completed by God when an individual desiring to do His will “turns” from his way of life to follow God and His way (John 4:34; cf. 1 John 2:17).

When one listens to God and starts to follow Him based on a developing love for Him, trust in God grows through

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*experiencing* His trustworthiness (Gal 5:6; Heb 5:14). All who commit to follow God and His way of life experience a fuller and fuller life here-and-now through sanctification and are made perfect upon physical death (Rom 6:22; 1 John 3:1–2). They are completed in their final form when they receive their resurrected bodies (Phil 3:20–21). All who have learned to trust and obey God over the ages become part of His close-knit holy family and kingdom forever.

As we learn about God and His desire for us to join Him forever, what might hinder us from submitting to His lordship and receiving Him into our lives? When looking at biblical repentance, the key to “turning” to God is ***His love*** (1 John 4:16). There are quite a few who might respond positively to God’s love (1 John 4:19), if they would just slow down and listen to Him above all of the competing voices, of which many are satanic distractions. When one turns to God, repentance is manifested through an obvious developing trust and obedience toward God (Gal 5:6; John 14:21, 23). God’s people learn through Christ’s leading to do less and less harm toward others, because God is developing godly love in them and love does no harm (1 Cor 13:4–8; Gal 5:13).

The New Testament is clear regarding the spiritual impact of turning to God. One must turn from self to God in order for God to give spiritual birth into His family. And many, like the Prodigal Son, have to experience some difficult event or series of events before they will slow down and allow God to help them come to their senses. There are others that during quiet moments, God is able to speak to them and eventually reveal Himself and His way of life. In either case, ***there must be a turning to God (repentance) prior to being spiritually born into His family.***

### Carrying One’s Cross & Experiencing Jesus’ Joy

As Christ’s followers learn to put personal ambitions aside, God asks each to carry their own personal crosses willingly suffering on behalf of others. This is not easy, but worthwhile eventually producing great joy. Kyle Idleman, a pastor of one of the US’ largest churches, came to the point of realizing that he had been trying to bring people to God through messages that were

appealing, comfortable, and convenient.<sup>30</sup> Then, he came to the realization that ***Jesus did no such thing***. Jesus emphasized repentance, surrender, and brokenness more than forgiveness, salvation, and happiness.<sup>31</sup> Jesus taught that His followers were to deny self, pick up their crosses daily, and follow Him (Luke 9:23). Idleman realized that a cross best expressed Jesus' life and ministry and His invitation for others to join Him in humility, suffering, and death.<sup>32</sup>

Although Jesus was eternal like His Father and had physically created the universe and all that is in it, He did not think it beneath Him to humble Himself and die for His creation giving life to all who obediently respond. ***Jesus is an example of godly love in action!*** (Phil 2:5–8) Jesus' ministry did not stop with His death and resurrection but is ongoing from His place in Heaven at the right hand of the Father (Eph 1:20–23).

God does not tell us in advance what each of our individual crosses on behalf of others will be, yet He has specific duties for each to help bring His Creation to completion (Eph 2:10; Phil 2:13). There are no surprises for God. He knows what He is doing and how we will respond. He asks that *we make a commitment to follow Him* based on His character and ability. He tells all that those who follow Jesus ***will suffer, but they will also experience great joy*** as they join Him in rescuing people from eternal pain and suffering (e.g. Paul-Col 1:24). Are we willing to give up our personal aspirations as we learn to trust Him with our physical and spiritual lives?

Sometimes, we make half-hearted commitments that end up leaving us without fulfillment due to our lack of faith. God is looking for genuine trust in *His character and ability*. He is looking for true commitment, sacrifice, and allegiance in the face of whatever circumstances that He allows in our lives. In all cases for those following God and His ways, ***He uses His people out of every tribe and nation to represent Him to the world***. *Those who follow Him are His priests and light for all* (Matt 5:14–16; 1 Peter 2:9–10). Those who follow Jesus are His ambassadors (2 Cor 5:20).

After God showed His love to Israel as a nation and rescued them from slavery in Egypt, the whole nation agreed to follow Him not fully understanding His holiness nor priestly

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demands (Ex 19:4–6). Many who said that they would follow God had not made a long-term commitment and thus continued to sin and rebel against God. They did not make it into the good land that God had set aside for them because they would not undergo the trials that He set before them with a proper attitude of trust and obedience, which made all who listened stronger (Num 14:20–35). God has a better way of life for us now, which also includes trials and tribulations.

### *A New Creation*

If we continue to take time to *study* and *act* on God's Word, Jesus Christ and our Heavenly Father teach us to know the reality of both the physical and spiritual world in which we live. As we obey God, He matures us allowing us to live in a closer relationship with Him. Our character will eventually become totally transformed to be like Jesus' resulting in a very close mature relationship after mortal death. But even prior to physical death, Christ's followers experience immediate transformation:

- (1) they immediately *become new creations* "in Christ" through spiritual birth into God's eternal close-knit holy family (2 Cor 5:17; Eph 1:13–14);
- (2) they immediately *start experiencing the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit* (Rom 6:22); those who have been born of God sin less and less and less due to the Holy Spirit living in them (1 John 3:9);
- (3) they are *immediately justified* before God although their justification is not realized until they experience God face-to-face (Rom 5:1; 1 John 3:2). In reality, with spiritual birth into God's family comes a miracle through which God removes their sins having placed their sins in Christ on the Cross and makes them righteous before Him through His righteousness (Rom 1:16–17; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24); and
- (4) as they follow Jesus, they are *empowered by the Holy Spirit and tell others about God's goodness* (Rom 8:14; Acts 1:8).

*Experiencing Jesus' Joy*

What did it cost God to perfect those who learn to trust Him over the ages? From Scripture, we find that *it is mandatory that all sin be removed* from those who want to come into God's eternal presence (John 3:14–15). Sin cannot be just covered over with a bandage. The wound has to be totally healed to the point that there is no trace that a wound ever existed. The Psalmist David once said that due to God's loving kindness, He has removed the transgressions of those who love and respect Him as far as the east is separated from the west (Ps 103:11–12).

So how did God remove our sins from us allowing us to be with Him for eternity? Paul uses three basic thoughts to express how God removed the sins from those who learn to trust and obey Him out of love:

- (1) in Galatians 3:13–14, Paul stated that Christ became a *curse* for those who are trusting in God so that those who are “in Christ” might receive the blessings of Abraham. From the Old Testament, it is clear that when someone violates God's law (His teachings), he or she is cursed in the sense that judgement for sin is coming. The penalty for sin (doing wrong) is death, separation from God and His community. Jesus, the Messiah, became a curse on our behalf, was judged guilty, crucified on our behalf, and spent three days, which might have been like 3000 years, in Sheol (spiritual prison) separated from God the Father on our behalf;
- (2) in Colossians 2:13–14, Paul stated that when we were dead, separated from God, because of our transgressions, Christ's atoning work on the Cross allowed God to take the master list with our names and corresponding civil charges against each of us and *nail it to Christ's cross condemning Him and cancelling out the charges against us*; and
- (3) Paul explicitly stated in 2 Corinthians 5:21 that when Jesus Christ died on a cross on our behalf, God the Father *transferred our sin to Him* who had been sinless up to that moment. Peter said the same thing (1 Peter 2:21–24).

In this same Scripture, we discover that in exchange for our sin, God has placed His righteousness in us so that we stand before Him one hundred percent righteous, holy. ***This is a miracle of gigantic proportion.***

It is easy to consider God's saving miracle on our behalf, thank Him for dying in our place, and go on with life as usual. But, this is where we need to really *pause and consider* what God has done for us, and what He wants in return. ***At great cost to Himself through suffering, pain, and death, God took on the sins of all who learn to trust Him.*** In exchange, God asks all to trust Him enough to follow Jesus Christ.

Jesus knew that dying on a cross and dying spiritually was going to produce ***terrible pain and suffering*** both physically and emotionally. Just before He was arrested to go to His death on a cross, He asked the Father one last time if there was another way to take care of our sin. In reality, He already knew the answer to His question and had already submitted to His Father's will.

It is hard to imagine what the Father went through emotionally when He saw His Son being rejected by His own people (John 1:11). Think of the emotional pain of both the Father and Son when the very people whom Jesus had ministered to for three years doing only good turned against Him and asked for Barabbas, a known criminal, to be set free (John 18:39–40). Imagine the Father's emotional pain when Jesus was humiliated, scourged, and died physically a cruel and painful physical death on a cross. Then imagine the most painful part of all: because Jesus took on the sins of those who learn to trust God, the Father had to turn His back on His obedient faithful Son for three days while He was undergoing ex-communication from Him on our behalf. This is Jesus' spiritual death on our behalf, which was a separation from His Father with whom He had always lived previously in perfect love and unity (Matt 27:46; John 2:18–22; Heb 2:9).

Consider Jesus' abandonment by the Father when our sins were placed on Him. As Jesus was dying, He cried out loudly, "My God, my God, for what reason have you abandoned me [Matt 27:46]?" Jesus knew why His Heavenly Father was abandoning Him. That proclamation was to remind us of the great cost that He and the Father were paying for our redemption.

We know from Jesus' discussion with one of the thieves that Jesus and that particular thief would be in upper Sheol (Paradise) that very day (Luke 23:43), and we know from multiple places in Scripture that Jesus would be in Sheol (Hades) for three days preaching the Good News of how God the Father and He had arranged to eradicate sin (Isa 53; Gal 3:13–14; 1 Peter 2:24). As He ascended to the Father after spending time in Sheol on our behalf (Acts 2:31), He was also freed of sin and set free all those in upper Sheol (1 John 2:1; Eph 4:7–12).

Those who were trusting God prior to the Cross were finally able to be made perfectly righteous through His death allowing them to be in God's immediate presence after Christ finished His atoning work. Jesus' death on humanity's behalf removes all sin from all who submit to the loving Creator for all time. ***The major spiritual battle that was critical for a saving opportunity for all mankind had been won*** (John 19:30; Rev 5:9–10; 11:15). This battle was won through Christ's obedient and sacrificial life and death through which He suffered greatly on humanity's behalf.

This same Jesus who willingly endured the shame and suffering of death on a cross as a criminal on our behalf ***simultaneously experienced great joy*** because He was providing salvation for all who desire a righteous life with God (John 15:10–13; 17:13; Heb 12:2). ***This is godly love! What are you willing to do for your friends?***

If we consider both the ***suffering and joy*** of Christ, we will start to understand the heart and mind of God, which is also becoming the heart and mind of Christ's followers (1 Cor 2:16). Christ's followers are learning to love and thereby experience godly joy and excitement as they minister to those around them.

### ***God Requires a Personal Decision***

Jesus said that ***if we are not willing to deny ourselves and carry our individual assigned crosses and follow Him, we are not able to be His disciples*** (Luke 14:26–27; cf. Matt 10:38). So, is God worthy of our turning from self to Him? ***Of course He is worthy!*** If you do not feel a sense of awe and reverence toward

God, you are still too focused on yourself. When we come to realize what God has done for everyone, the proper response would be to return God's love by asking Him into our lives.

Think of it his way. If you have not yet come to understand *why you should joyfully follow Jesus and stop looking for personal gain*, you are still being deceived by Satan. If you have any real understanding on what is spiritually going on around you, you would want to do your part in building God's eternal close-knit holy family. Consider this: what would you personally be willing to do to save someone whom you love dearly from a terrible fate such as dying in a fire, a drowning, or an auto accident? Most of us would do whatever it takes including possibly giving our own lives to save those whom we love.

Rescuing others from an eternal state of shame and pain and helping them to improve their lives right now is what God is asking us to join Him in doing, which fulfills the purpose of God's creation. Jesus gave His life that we may live life abundantly (John 10:10–11; 1 John 3:16). *Jesus is asking us to follow Him in suffering* as we pick up our individual crosses and suffer for others because of what He has done for us *and* because our love is growing for all (John 15:20; cf. Matt 10:25). *If we have not yet allowed God to teach us to truly care about those around us, we probably will not be willing to suffer on their behalf* (1 John 3:17; 4:11–16).

Consider what Paul said about his own suffering for others. In a letter to the Saints living at Colossae, Paul said,

Now, I am *rejoicing* in those things suffered on your behalf and I am supplying the needs of the afflictions of Christ in my body on behalf of His Body, which is the Church, of which I have become a minister according to the (my) stewardship (management) from God, . . . Col 1:24–25

Paul wanted Christ's followers at Colossae to understand that his suffering was not something that destroyed his joy but instead enhanced it due to the advancement of the Gospel, which brought many out of the bondage of darkness into God's Kingdom (Col 1:13–14). Paul was following Christ and was being empowered by

Him to present as many as possible before God at the Judgement Day *complete* in Christ (Col 2:28–29).

In a similar way, Paul told the Corinthians that they were sharing in Christ's followers ongoing afflictions due to spiritual warfare with Satan as they proclaimed the Gospel (2 Cor 1:3–11; 4:7–10). He went on to tell the Saints residing at Corinth that the Macedonian Saints, who were also being afflicted for their trust in God as they followed Jesus, were experiencing great joy through their generous behavior towards others (2 Cor 8:1–4). Paul also encouraged the Thessalonians to continue to do God's work in spite of the afflictions that they were suffering as they followed Christ. Paul and his fellow co-laborers were rejoicing because the Saints at Thessalonica were continuing to grow in their faith (1 Thess 2:14–3:13).

### Following Jesus: Daily Apprenticeship

Jesus said, “Behold, I am standing at the door (of each person's life) and knocking. If anyone hears my sound (from knocking) and opens the door, I shall come in onto Him and I will fellowship with him and he with me.” Rev 3:20

Jesus is our perfect example and leader. Jesus takes pleasure in doing and saying those things that His Heavenly Father desires (John 4:34; 8:26–29). Like the Father, Jesus loves all people dearly. *Jesus came to serve, not to be served* (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45). He consistently spent His time and energy teaching as He healed the sick and removed demons. His main teaching to all was “go and sin no more” (Matt 3:2; 4:17; 11:20–24; cf. John 5:14; 8:11). There were many nights that Jesus just dropped where He had been ministering without an adequate or comfortable place to sleep (Matt 8:20; Luke 9:58). There were many times when He could have used some rest but pushed on bringing light to as many as possible during His short stay on earth. All of this culminated with many asking for His death and the release of a known criminal (Matt 27:11–22; Mark 15:6–13; Luke 14:13–21; John 18:37–19:16). Jesus does not ask for anyone's sympathy, but He

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does ask for our love and obedient service to others in response to His obedient service and suffering for all (John 15:10).

Although many start out wanting a savior but not a lord, every individual must eventually choose whether he or she wishes to follow God and His caring way of life or follow the current leader of evil in our world, Satan, and his destructive anti-God ways (John 3:36; 8:43–46; 14:23; 1 John 3:7–10; cf. Deut 30:15–16; et al.). *As time marches on, some come to a place in their lives where they want to experience God’s goodness more fully and receive Him as both lord and savior.* When that happens, God begets them spiritually into His holy family and starts His work of molding and shaping them into His image (Eph 1:13–14; Rom 6:22). In the Bible, this process is called sanctification. Our English word is translated from the Hebrew of the Old Testament, *qadosh*, and the Greek of the New Testament, *hagios*. Both words, *qadosh* and *hagios*, are normally translated as “holy.” The primary idea behind both words is that one is living a life that is *set apart* from the ways of this world, *dedicated* to God, and *emulating* God’s moral lifestyle.

There is no room for lukewarm followers (Rev 3:16). When individuals follow Christ, God transforms their mind to care more and more as Christ cares and empowers them to follow His leading instead of Satan’s. If one continues to follow Satan knowingly or unknowingly, he or she stays on that wide easy road that leads to eternal separation from God (1 John 5:19).

### What Do You Say?

***From what you have already read, you know that you have been created by God to be part of His eternal close-knit holy family. This is your primary purpose for existence! God wants you to voluntarily join Him and His family.*** When you willingly turn your life over to Him for justification and development, God works in your life shaping your character to become more and more like Jesus Christ’s. Whether you die physically or are taken up to God without dying (a rapture), God completes His work in His obedient children (Rom 8:28–30; 1 John 3:1–2), and when you stand before Him entering your assigned place in eternity within

His family, you will be morally like Christ standing before God clothed in His righteousness without any sin (2 Cor 5:21).

***God asks all to respond to His great love through repentance, obedience to His Written Inspired Word, and obedience to His Son as the Holy Spirit leads.*** Prior to making a commitment to follow Jesus, no one can clean themselves up righteously enough to be presentable in his or her own righteousness (Rom 3:23), but the good news is that *God receives you just as you are*. If we have a desire to do God's will and come to Him committed to follow Jesus as our lord and savior, *it is God who cleanses us* of our sins (2 Cor 5:21; Col 2:13–14; 1 Peter 2:24). As we start a committed life with God, we learn to trust and obey Him more and more with our growing understanding of His great love for us.

At this point in your life, it is my prayer that you have become more aware through God's Word how much He loves you and wants you to receive Him into your life. If you have never submitted to God asking Him to be the ***lord*** and ***savior*** of your life, now is the time.

### Let's Talk Commitment

Let's talk commitment:

- (1) Are you at a place in your life where you know that Jesus Christ became incarnate as a babe, lived a serving life, died on a cross for the removal of your sin, was buried, and was raised from the dead three days later according to Scripture (John 1:29; 3:14–17; Luke 1:26–35; 1 Cor 15:4)?;
- (2) do you understand that sin causes disharmony, hurt, and destruction and needs to be removed from your life in order that you may be reconciled to God and others (Rom 6:17–23; 2 Cor 5:17–21)?; and
- (3) do you know that everyone is a sinner and in need of a savior (Rom 3:21–26; 6:23; Gal 3:13–14, 24)?

Many people go to church, read their Bibles, go to Bible studies, make good plans to follow Christ, but never make a solid commitment to follow Christ. ***Many in our churches today have***

*never actually stepped out in faith and started following Christ.*

If you would like to be part of God's eternal family and have not done so yet, this is what is required: ***commit to follow Jesus, step out in faith, and start following!*** What God said to His people through his prophet Malachi about trust and obedience regarding the tithe is applicable to everyone's life in all areas of our relationship with God and fellow Christians. ***Test God!*** Step out in faith/trust as the Holy Spirit leads and see how God will use and bless you (Mal 3:10).

Considering God's pure nature of love, which has been demonstrated by His actions for all and shown by His words as recorded in Scripture, have you come to a place where you trust Him enough to submit your life to Him (1 John 4:16; cf. 1:3; Rom 10:9–13)? Once you have turned to God and have submitted to His lordship (repentance; 2 Peter 3:9), He will never lose nor forsake you (John 10:9–17, 27–30).

Jesus asks all who are considering submission to His lordship to consider what He is asking prior to submitting (Luke 14:26–33). He tells all who wish to be part of God's family that if they are not willing to join Him in building His Father's eternal holy family, the Father will not allow them to be part of His family (John 15:1–2, 8). Jesus' marching orders for all family members have one common point, "As you are going (living your lives), ***make disciples*** [Matt 28:19]." Without being willing to follow God's leadership in helping to reconcile a lost world unto Himself (Matt 7:21; cf. John 7:17), individuals will not be empowered by the Holy Spirit *enabling* them to be disciples of Christ (Luke 14:27, 33; Acts 1:7–8).

As we presently come to a place of commitment, I am reminded that we all need Jesus as both lord and savior in every aspect of our lives. I know that God will lead all who listen to Him out of an unfulfilled life into one filled with inner peace, joy, and great expectation. In addition, I know that as individuals start listening to God, their lives change for the better *immediately* and *forever* (Rom 6:22). *Within a relatively short period of time*, their family and friends will be blessed right along with them. There is no greater gift for a parent, spouse, or child than for a loved one to start following Jesus.

Ok, *now* is the time. If you have *not* already turned to God, you should do so now. It's time to make a commitment to follow Jesus. Remember that Jesus does not accept lukewarm followers. With a firm commitment to follow Jesus, ***God will come immediately into your life through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and start developing you so that you are able to walk in godly love and bless many.*** If you try to wait until you become righteous enough to approach God, you will be waiting forever. Everyone needs God's help in becoming righteous. ***So let's pray to God asking forgiveness of our wrongdoing and committing to follow Jesus.*** Pray this prayer or one similar to it to our Heavenly Father, who knows your heart, ***and trust Him to start His redemptive and transforming work in you immediately:***

Heavenly Father, thank you for sending Jesus Christ, who put the universe together, to die on everyone's behalf. I know that you love me beyond my comprehension. Through your Son Jesus Christ's death, you have provided the one and only way to remove all my sin and replace it with your righteousness. I ask for your forgiveness of my sins and pledge my allegiance and loyalty to you forever. I know that sin has kept me from having a close personal relationship with you, and that by submitting to your lordship, you will remove my sin and make me righteous forever. Please help me to walk in your holy ways and follow your leading. In return, I commit to follow Christ as faithfully as I know how. I trust you and your ability to enable me to do your will, walk in your ways, and ultimately bring me into your eternal presence. As you raised Jesus from the dead and placed Him eternally at your right hand, I know that you will raise and place me into your eternal presence as a member of your close-knit holy eternal family. Father, thank you for creating me and patiently waiting for my submission. You are worthy! I pray that from now on, my life will bring honor and glory to you as

people see my life becoming more and more like Jesus' life. Amen.

### **Being Liberated by God**

OK, now you have done it! If you have prayed that prayer or one similar to it now or in the past, the angels in heaven celebrated with God (Luke 15:7, 10, 22–24). God starts your reconciled life with Him by saying to the rest of the Church, “*loose (unbind) him and let him go his way* [John 11:43–44].” Just as Lazarus needed to be loosed from his burial wrappings, each of Christ’s new followers need the help of the Body to remove the wrappings of this world that bind them from godly living.

God expects you to connect—if you are not already connected—to a local church, and He expects the members of that church to have a genuine interest in freeing you from your worldly thinking and actions through proper assimilation of His Word, which comes from sound study, proper application of His Word, and a submissive heart to His teaching and leading.

Now that you have turned from your sins and current way of life to follow Jesus (repentance), ***life is going to become new and exciting***. You are now different: you are officially a child of God, a king and priest, an ambassador, who takes orders from Jesus Christ, the King over all kings. It is important that you, just as all of God’s children, stay closely connected to God through the reading and proper application of His inspired and authoritative Word. Jesus said that His disciples will know reality if they remain in His Word:

If you remain in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you shall know the truth (reality), and the truth shall set you free. John 8:31–32

By obediently serving God and reading and applying His Word, God teaches Jesus’ followers reality setting them freer and freer from the diminishing sin within them. As they stay in His Word and follow His leading, He continues to bring their thinking into close alignment with His (Rom 12:1–2; 1 Cor 2:16).

### The Father's Work & Your Development

In reality, the Father is the One who ultimately does the final shaping and trimming in *everyone's* life (John 15:1–2), and He uses the Holy Spirit to help all of Christ's followers know His will (1 John 2:27; Phil 2:13). It gives Christ's followers great comfort to know that they are important enough to the Father that He does not give this responsibility to another. God the Father takes primary responsibility for His obedient children's development and controls events to the point that Christ's followers are developed properly.

As the Father makes sure that His obedient children acquire a proper understanding of the world (world-view) (Rom 12:1–2; cf. John 8:31b–32), He develops their patience, kindness, righteousness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control through the leading of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22–23). In addition to everyone witnessing (John 15:1–5, 8; Matt 28:18–20; Acts 1:8; 1 Peter 2:9), God uses Christ's more mature followers *to develop the less mature building up the entire Body of Christ* (Eph 4:11–16; cf. 1 Cor 12:4–7). We will look at Christ's followers' potential places of service in the next chapter as we consider sojourning with God on this side of eternity.



## Sojourning with God

Jesus said that only those who had a desire *to do the will of the Father* would come to know Him (John 7:17; 8:39–47; cf. Matt 25:31–46; Rom 2:13). He also said that there would be some who called Him “lord” who would not be with Him in Heaven because *they had not done the Father’s will* (Matt 7:21). If someone wants to know God, he or she must be willing to follow His lead. God does not weigh people’s good and bad activities throughout their lives to see if they have done enough good to enter Heaven. ***Perfection is required*** and no one other than Christ has lived a perfect life (Rom 3:23; 2 Cor 5:21). In reality, God only accepts people into His eternal family who are willing to allow Him to shape them into Jesus Christ’s moral image and obediently follow Him. ***There is no place in God’s eternal holy family for lukewarm followers of Christ*** (Rev 3:16). ***God requires commitment with corresponding action!***

Just as in Malachi’s time, God wants us to trust Him enough to do our part in supporting His Kingdom. It is one thing to know about something, *it is something else to love God and others enough to get involved*. God asks all to listen to Him, learn to return His love, and to step out in faith and seek to do His will. Our Creator is seeking out and working with all who *love and honor Him through their actions* as well as their words (Luke 6:46; Rev 22:12). Are you willing to advance and solidify God’s will for your life more fully? This chapter should help those, who desire to know more fully their special place in God’s family, experience more joy as they respond to God. Those who follow Jesus closely will experience more and more of His joy. It is important to remember that God only guides those who listen to Him. If you are a follower of Christ, God will put you to work doing your part. ***Everyone is important to God and everyone who listens to Him is spiritually born into His eternal family by Him***

*and has a place of service.* All who listen to God come to understand that everyone is just traveling through this part of eternity (sojourning) either headed for the New Heaven and Earth or headed for Hell.

Jesus' followers are *radically different* than the world. While Christ's followers live out this short part of eternity, they are reminded to keep their focus on Him. They live with godly love growing in their heart, which in turn radically alters their outlook toward others. As Christ's followers step out in faith daily *growing in their love for God and all* (1 John 4:16), they become more and more willing to suffer and sacrifice on behalf of others experiencing a greater and greater inner peace and joy (John 15:8–11; John 17:13 & Heb 12:2). *This presents a paradox to those who are not following Christ because without a genuine love for God and others, one will not normally experience joy by helping those for whom he or she has not gained a genuine concern* (John 15:12–13; 1 John 3:16–18; Col 1:24; 3:10–17). Through Christ's followers' individual and collective good works for all, *the world has an opportunity to understand the caring nature of God* (Matt 5:16; Col 3:10).

Jesus expects His followers to help others with their physical needs as God leads (Matt 25:34–40), but even more importantly, He expects His disciples to help others become disciples *and* to help them grow in their relationship with God (Matt 28:18–20; 2 Cor 5:17–21). In order to do this, Jesus' disciples should be intentionally seeking God's will as they help others know about God and His holy ways. *It is Jesus' followers' honor, privilege, and duty to engage people wherever they are in their spiritual journey and help them to know well the one true God.* It also important that Christ's followers warn people about the spiritual warfare going on around them. Everyone needs to know that Satan is still trying to deceive and kill as many as possible (1 Peter 5:8; 2 Cor 11:13–15).

### **Sojourning**

. . . And the land shall not ever be sold because the land belongs to me, (and) because you are

temporary dwellers and sojourners with me; . . .  
 Lev 25:23

For *our place of citizenship exists in (the) heavens*  
 out of which we are awaiting a savior, the Lord  
 Jesus Christ . . . . Phil 3:20; cf. Heb 11:8–10

Blessed is the God and Father of our lord, Jesus  
 Christ, who according to His rich mercy has caused  
 us to be born again into a living hope through the  
 resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead—into an  
 inheritance (that is) eternal, pure, and unfading,  
 which has been kept in the heavens for us, who  
 through the ability of God are being guarded  
 through faith for a prepared salvation that shall be  
 revealed at the end of time . . . . 1 Peter 1:3–5

***We are just traveling through!*** We are sojourning with  
 God and one another as we join Him in rescuing as many as  
 possible bringing them into His eternal close-knit holy family. Our  
 journeying with God is fulfilling His purpose in the Creation (Eph  
 2:10; 2 Tim 1:8–9), which is to create a free-willed family closer to  
 Him than His faithful angels who did not join Satan in opposing  
 His authority (Rev 12:7–12). When we accept God’s love through  
 Jesus Christ, we become fully reconciled children beginning our  
 role as His priests, His representatives, on earth (Ex 19:5–6;  
 1 Peter 2:9–10).

As God’s representatives, we are to proclaim the reality of  
 God’s Creation and act as mediators between God and man. We  
 are ***not*** to settle down and become satisfied using our personal  
 talents and blessings from God solely for ourselves and our  
 families. We have come to recognize that our physical life is only a  
 small portion of our eternal life, and that we have been called to be  
 co-laborers with God (1 Cor 3:9; 2 Cor 5:17–6:1). We have been  
 fully reconciled to God with all the emotional and legal rights of  
 direct descendants. ***We have an eternal home with God*** awaiting  
 us, and we know that in a short time the trials and challenges of  
 this age shall be over (Phil 3:20; Titus 2:11–14; Rev 21:1–7),

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therefore, we want to make the most of the time that God gives us on earth.

Christ's followers have not picked up passes to heaven and are just waiting to go home, and they are not presently sitting on the sidelines acting as spectators watching God at work! ***Christ's followers are fully engaged co-laborers with the Creator*** (John 5:19; 15:5; 1 Cor 3:9). They have *the privilege, honor, and duty of representing God on earth* to those living out their lives under the deceptions and leadership of Satan (1 John 5:12, 19; cf. John 8:34–47). It brings Christ's followers ***great joy*** to see as many as possible ***rescued*** from present ungodly life styles and future eternal shame and suffering as they receive God into their lives (Rom 6:22 & Rev 3:20).

### Being “in Christ”

***Being “in Christ,” which means “having a close obedient relationship with Christ,” is critical.*** It is our obedient close association with Christ that gives us access to the Father and enables us to ask Him for empowerment to overcome evil as we lead others to Him (Eph 2:18; 6:10–20). Without Christ, we cannot know the will of the Father. When we faithfully follow Christ, we will be taught His will (Phil 2:13). Being “in Christ” is the only way that anyone finds true peace as they receive more and more the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16). Jesus brings true inner peace to all of His followers (Eph 2:13–19). The Holy Spirit works in all of Jesus' followers producing great love, joy, and inner peace (Gal 5:22–24). Through the work of the Holy Spirit, God rearranges Christ's followers' priorities and they rejoice in being part of His great rescue operation.

Christ's disciples are being shaped daily by God Himself to be more and more like Jesus (John 15:2; Rom 8:28–29; Eph 4:11–14). Christ's true followers understand the importance of following His commandments including the one that directs them to go out and make disciples out of every people group of the world (Matt 28:18–20). ***Making disciples means more than introducing people to God, it also means taking the time to train***

*those who decide to follow Jesus.* Teaching the ways of God to those who do not know Him well takes time and effort.

### *The Body of Christ & Godly Unity*

Those who are “in Christ” are also part of the Body of Christ. Christ is the head of the Body, the Church ( Col 1:18). The phrase “Body of Christ” appears in the New Testament in various forms to represent Christ’s literal body or figuratively to represent His followers working together as *His bodily representative* throughout the Messianic Age.

Some New Testament writers used imagery of a human body to represent the collective work of Christ’s followers as they *submit to His leadership* in order to carry out His ongoing saving work. From this metaphorical imagery, two critical attributes of Christ’s followers are highlighted:

- (1) godly unity; and
- (2) the synergistic ability and strength that is gained through utilization of combined individual talents being enlightened and empowered by the Holy Spirit for the good of all.

In his metaphorical imagery of the Body of Christ, Paul wants all of Christ’s followers to understand the importance of each member. *Everyone is important and has work to do.* When considering any physical living body, each member—whether foot, hand, ear, eye, heart, lungs, kidneys, and the list goes on—has an important contributing function to the overall ability and well being of that body (1 Cor 12:12–25).

Considering how the various members of a living physical body work together for the good of the whole, Paul stressed the importance of *unity* among the various members of the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:26–27). Paul was asking the Corinthians to unite under the teaching and leadership of Christ and follow their local teachers and leaders such as himself as individuals who were directly under the authority of Christ. There should be *no divisions* in any of the local churches over anything including the teachings of their local leaders such as Paul, Peter (Cephas), and Apollos.

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Christ's followers were to stay **united** under *the lordship* of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1:10–15; 3:1–8) living holy lives (Eph 4:1–3).

In Ephesians, Paul emphasized the importance for Gentile and Jewish Christians to treat each other as *equal family members* disregarding the prejudices that they had both learned through their different religious and cultural ways of life (Eph 2:11–22).

He began his teaching by using two metaphorical images to help Christians understand godly unity:

- (1) Paul used the idea that the Jew and Gentile Christians should be living out their lives as members of a **single** family. In his metaphorical imagery, he stated that Christ had destroyed *to mesotoichon tou phragmou*, “the dividing middle-wall,” that divided them through His death on a cross (Eph 2:14). In this metaphorical image, Paul brought to mind a common way of living in the first-century Mediterranean world through which families living in cities often lived in large buildings subdivided into family living areas by “middle-walls.” These “middle-walls” were solid without doors and windows providing separation for families and businesses, one from another.<sup>33</sup> Paul was not advocating that all of Christ's followers live together, but he was telling his audience that they now belonged to the **same** family, the Family of God; and
- (2) Paul went on to use a second metaphorical image stating that through Christ's redeeming work, they were reconciled into “one body” (Eph 2:16).

Paul went on to explicitly state that both Jew and Gentile *Christians* were members of the same family, God's household, which made them family members and fellow citizens of His eternal kingdom (Eph 2:19). He closed this important teaching on Christian unity by using one last metaphorical image. Christ's followers could consider themselves metaphorically as individual parts of a great House of God, which is continually under construction until the last person is added. The foundation of God's dwelling place consists of prophets and apostles with Jesus Himself being the cornerstone (Eph 2:20–22).

### *The Church*

The Greek word *ekklēsia*, which was understood in the first century as “assembly,” is now normally being translated by many as “church.” First century “assemblies” normally referred to called meetings whether religious, political, or general. Paul taught his various local assemblies that met in homes, synagogues, and other structures (Heb 10:23–25), ***that the risen Lord Jesus was still the active lord of the world-wide Church*** (Col 1:18). He told Christ’s followers at Corinth, “You are the Body of Christ, indeed *a member of a part of the whole* [1 Cor 12:27].” The followers at Corinth were a part of the Church residing in their region, which was a part of the entire world-wide Body, the Church (1 Cor 12:28).

After Jesus died on the Cross for all humanity and ascended to rule from His Father’s right hand in Heaven (Eph 1:18–23), we see a major shift from God’s people, the national Israel, to God’s people, the new Israel, consisting of all who became faithful followers of Christ (Gal 6:16; Phil 3:3). Initially, all of God’s people came out of the nation Israel, but within the first 20 years after Jesus’ ascension, many Gentiles had begun following Christ (Acts 15:3). Within 30 years, Paul said that the Gospel had been made known to all nations (Rom 16:26). Many Gentiles of various nations had decided to follow Jesus.

With Christ’s ascension to sit at the right hand of the Father, He became known as the King of Peace and Eternal High Priest (Heb 7:1–8:6). When the Creation is finalized, everyone—saved and unsaved—will submit to the lordship of Christ, who will in turn hand everything over to the Father that the Father may be everything to all (1 Cor 15:28; cf. 11:3; Eph 5:23).

During Jesus’ present reign over the Heavens and Earth, the Church, His Body, represents Him on Earth. The Church is no longer obligated to keep the nation Israel’s ordinances that regulated cultural activities (Acts 15:4–21; Eph 2:13–16; Col 2:9–23) nor the sacrificial laws, which were fulfilled in Christ’s atoning death (Heb 7:26–27; 8:13; 10:4, 10–14). This allows the Church to follow the moral lifestyle of God within all cultures as

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long as those cultural practices do not violate God's moral standards (Rom 3:31; 6:1–2; 7:12). Wherever God's people live, they are expected to live according to God's moral standards caring for all (Eph 4:1–6; 1 Peter 1:17–19).

Denominational, racial, generational, socio-economical, and political walls have all been constructed through Satan's prompting as humanity has struggled against God and His good plans for all. Christ's followers should be dismantling these walls within their local churches as they live out their lives. Therefore, Christ's followers should allow God to teach their hearts to love as He loves and live together as members of the same family. The universal Church is the part of God's eternal holy family that is presently living on Earth. It needs to act accordingly.

### Walking With Others in Our Local Churches

***The Church first and foremost is the Family of God!*** All true followers of Jesus Christ are part of the same Kingdom and have the same Sustainer living in them (Eph 4:1–6). Christ's followers worldwide and locally must allow Jesus to teach them more fully about God's family and its final state with perfect godly unity, "oneness," which became reality through His death as the world's sacrificial lamb (John 1:29; 17:20–23). All of Christ's followers should be striving for some godly unity in the here and now.

Members of each local church everywhere in the world should be so caring for one another that they are able to bear their innermost thoughts with one another without worrying about sensitive information being used against them later to cause additional hurt. Church members should love one another as God loves them making it possible to live in transparency with one another. That type of living brings godly joy and peace.

Within each local church, Jesus should be producing inner peace and joy in the hearts of its members. If there is little peace and joy, you and your fellow members need to fast and pray seeking God's help in removing sin and walking more closely with Him until He gives you a breakthrough. Members of congregations who are walking closely with God **will** experience great

excitement, joy, and peace as people continually come to God to be part of His family.

### ***Being Social***

John the Apostle proclaimed that God is light, and in Him there is no darkness. He went on to say,

If we are walking/living in the Light as He (God) is in the Light, we have *koinōnia*, “close fellowship,” with one another and the blood of Jesus, His Son, cleanses us from every sin. 1 John 1:7

This scriptural passage clearly states that *if someone does not have close fellowship with other followers of Christ, he or she is not walking with God*. In reality, individuals who are following Christ should feel closely connected to the rest of Christ’s followers.

As godly social beings, we should be volunteering in order to do *our part* within the Family of God. When members of the family are all doing their part, they will experience more godly unity and joy. Consider living at home for a moment. Think of the importance of parents teaching their children to do their part. If children do not learn to help with the basic work around the house and yard, they grow up with a handicap in managing and taking care of their own families in the future. It is also important for the ongoing sake of the family health that each member does his or her part, or the entire family suffers. If some are not socially responsible, others have to do more than they should, which takes away from other areas of their lives. This is contrary to God’s desire for our personal families, His local church families, and even His World-wide Family. May God help us work together as His family on Earth. ***It is only through Christ’s leadership that we can learn to work together in a godly fashion.*** Every congregation should strive to walk in holiness ***focusing on Jesus as lord*** of their lives. If Jesus is placed in any position of leadership less than first place, it does not take long for those congregations to become self-seeking and ineffective.

***Knowing & Employing My Talents***

It is God who is working in you-all to desire and to work according to His good purpose. Phil 2:13

We are His doing, having been created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has prepared ahead of time in order that we may live out our lives accordingly. Eph 2:10

***It is God who gives each person his or her assignments, and it is God who places a desire in each person's heart to do those assignments. In addition, it is God who gives each person the ability to carry out their assignments.*** Each person in God's family has assignments to help our local families and our international family function more smoothly. God has gifted each person with special skills so that when Christ's followers utilize their diversity properly, the Family of God operates in a productive manner through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:12–27): the combined output of everyone working under the lordship of Jesus is much greater than the sum of all individual work (synergism). This is true on local church levels and on our combined international level.

Each of Christ's disciples should be *seeking God's perfect will* for their lives so that they may grow into effective, loving co-members of their respective local churches. Each should seek God's will to find his or her place within their local assemblies so that their local churches may be working at peak performance in its local, regional, national, and world-wide ministries. As each of Christ's followers pick up his or her cross following His lead, *they will learn* how to utilize best their individual talents helping one another and witnessing with godly power to the world. Each true follower of Christ is a new Creation (2 Cor 5:17) undergoing constant training in righteousness by God the Father (sanctification) (John 15:1–2; Rom 6:22; Gal 5:22–23).

### *My Gifts/Talents*

So what about your gifts/talents from God. Many of you have already figured out what you are good at and what you are not. But, if you are still struggling with understanding your God-given talents, there are many straight forward spiritual tests available that show individuals their overall strengths and weaknesses. But, do not let any test result become your automatic guide to service within your local church and beyond. *Pray and ask God to reveal His desire for your work. **God will initiate** a desire in your heart to do what He has designed you to accomplish.* It may not match your greatest apparent skills. In reality, skills are important, but without Christ no one can do any work of spiritual worth. The spiritual battles around us are too great for humanity without God's leading and empowerment.

Paul taught the Corinthians, that although everyone was not a great evangelist, a great preacher, nor a great teacher, all had an important part in Christ's Body (1 Cor 12:11–31). Some will be carpenters, others cooks, others accountants, and the list goes on. But the one task that all of Jesus' followers have is the privilege, honor, and duty of sharing the Good News about God and His creation of a close-knit holy eternal family. All of His family living on earth have the joy and responsibility of witnessing.

Every position within God's family is important. God has no favorites and all of His children are loved just as He loves Jesus (John 17:23). Therefore, enjoy whatever God has appointed you to do. Remember, it is God who has created you with unique talents, and if you are following Jesus, it is God who gives you the desire to fulfill your part of the Creation and the capability to carry it out (Phil 2:13).

***Your journey with God starts with submission to Christ and continues when you step out in faith and find your place in the Body.*** After submitting to Jesus and committing to live according to His Word, ***the last major part of knowing God's will is established as you step out in faith (trust) and participate in His Creation.*** Consider how you might bless your local church and others through God's calling on your life. If you somehow misunderstand God's calling and start on a path that does not work, God will help you move to a more appropriate place of

service. It is a lot easier for God to help you find a closer match to His desire if you are serving in some capacity rather than if you are doing nothing.

### ***Empowerment as Needed***

In his book, *The Journey*, Billy Graham reminds all that when one submits to God's lordship they are not alone. When someone submits to Christ as lord and savior, *God gives them a whole new destiny with a new purpose and power.* Jesus' followers are given a ***new life***. This new life includes a *new relationship* with Him and others as a member of His eternal holy family and citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>34</sup>

If we are following Jesus, God will empower us to carry out our assigned ministries. In reality, spiritual battles are beyond our capability without Jesus leading the way. Through Jesus Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the Father supplies the appropriate authority, power, resources, talent, and frame of mind to each and every one of Christ's followers. ***It is empowerment through Christ that enables His disciples to work together effectively and joyfully helping all*** (Acts 1:8; Eph 3:16, 20; Phil 4:13; 2 Tim 1:7; cf. Eph 6:10–18—Christ's power). It is the Holy Spirit, who enlightens and works in each of Christ's disciples as they bring a lost world to God through their actions and words (Rom 8:14; 1 Cor 2:13; Eph 1:13; 2 Tim 1:14).

### ***Stepping Out in Faith***

God asks each of Christ's followers to help others on an individual, family, local-church, and community-wide level as part of their ***daily*** life. Although God is not asking all of Christ's followers to go into full-time ministry, He is asking ***all*** to step out in faith and become involved as He leads. As Christ's followers listen to God, they do their assigned parts helping their local church families proclaim the Gospel. Through prayer, seeking utilization of godly talent, and ministering under Christ and His appointed local overseers, God helps all of Jesus' followers serve others individually and collectively.

Once an individual has made a genuine commitment to follow Jesus Christ, there is only one thing left to do: **do it!** We are justified and empowered only when we **trust and obey** the Sent Son. We join God in His saving work because we are justified and empowered by Christ through the Holy Spirit. Therefore, let us **joyfully do** our assigned works, not out of resentment nor fear but out of a great love for God as He develops our hearts.

It is critical for Christ's followers *to step out in faith and actually follow Him. **Implementation matters!*** Consider this potential personal scenario:

- (1) you see a vegetable stand on the side of the road selling incredibly good fresh local grown vegetables at 80% off local pricing;
- (2) you seize the opportunity and purchase some fresh vegetables for the rest of the week thinking about how good fresh salads and steamed vegetables will be for your health;
- (3) you take your fresh vegetable home and put them away planning on using them starting tomorrow; and
- (4) you never take the time to make the first salad nor steam the first pan of vegetables and they all spoil.

What type of benefit did you get from buying those fresh vegetables? Do you see the problem? Desiring something and even investing in something does not mean that you will benefit from your planning and investing. There are many people who have all sorts of good plans and investments such as exercise machines and self help books just collecting dust. *If you do not follow through and implement your plans and investments, they will never do you any good!*

This is the same phenomena that is continually occurring in our contemporary local churches. Many are meeting on a regular basis with others and making plans to get serious about their walk with Christ. But, through Satan's deceptions, personal desires, and many forms of busyness most do not make a solid commitment and implement it by stepping out in faith and truly following Him. In their book, *Beyond Belief to Convictions*, Josh McDowell and Bob

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Hostetler state that if individuals do not follow through on something that inspires them within hours after inspiration, many forget and move on as if nothing had occurred.<sup>35</sup> When you are inspired by God and become convicted about a change that you should make in your life, make a commitment, step out in faith, and live accordingly.

### Christ's Followers Are on Mission

*Through Jesus Christ, God has fulfilled His promise to all by making it possible for everyone to be blessed through Abraham, who walked in faithful obedience with God* (Gen 12:1–4; 15:6; cf. Heb 11:8–12). When Jesus carried out His mission by coming to us on our human level proclaiming God's great love and righteousness through His actions and words, He fulfilled our shortcomings of living perfectly according to the Law through His sinless life and redeeming death on the Cross (John 3:14–17; 13:1; Gal 3:13–14). He made God's perfect unity possible for all who receive Him (John 1:11–13; 17:20–23; cf. Rev 3:20). Jesus has made the Father's perfect plan of reconciliation possible and is revealing it to all people through the Church (Eph 3:9–11).

God's plan of rescuing *both* Jew and Gentile from the corruption of sin had been hidden from all including Satan and his evil coworkers from the beginning of the Creation (Col 1:26–28). The Gospel Message clearly states that *all who freely receive the Father's Sent Son and submit to His lordship are fully reconciled to Him for eternity*. They are born spiritually into His eternal close-knit holy family and join God as He carries out the greatest rescue mission of eternity (1 Peter 5:8–9; 2 Cor 11:13–15).

### *Being Light*

Jesus' mission is also His followers' mission. Jesus is the Light of the World: He exposes reality (John 8:12; 8:31b–32; 18:37). After Jesus' ascension, His disciples, *the Church, became the light of the world* (Matt 5:14). They do not minister alone. Jesus and the Father dwell in them providing guidance and

empowerment as needed (John 14:23; Acts 1:8; 1 John 3:9). If individuals reject Jesus' followers, they are in reality rejecting the Father and Son (Luke 10:16). Jesus does not leave His followers alone. The Holy Spirit, the Comforter, guides them in all truth speaking to them the words of the Father (John 16:7, 13).

Jesus' earthly life was an exact representation of His Heavenly Father's nature (Heb 1:3; Col 2:9). Jesus' earthly life presented a visible *image* of the invisible Father (Col 1:15). If you knew Jesus during His earthly life, you had seen the very nature of His Heavenly Father (John 14:9). Prior to disobeying God and being corrupted by sin, Adam and Eve were created in the image of the Father and Son (Gen 1:26). Jesus' followers, the Church, are being renewed into the *image* of Jesus and the Father (Col 3:10). If Jesus' followers act like Jesus, the World will know the nature of God. The Church led by Christ through the Holy Spirit is the Father's only representative on earth (Col 2:10; 2 Cor 5:17–21). Christ's followers should represent God well and be bright light in the World. Bright light reveals reality; dim light allows much to be hidden.

I heard a story one time about a blind lady who worked at an airport making a living there selling merchandise. One day being in a great hurry, a traveler knocked over her stand with all its merchandise. He was in such a hurry that he did not help her put her stand up nor make any effort to help her recover her merchandise, which had been scattered everywhere. Everyone else seemed equally in a rush and the blind lady managed by herself to straighten her stand and then started crawling about on the floor feeling for her merchandise. She was emotionally distraught as she tried to recover her merchandise in the midst of such a hectic crowd. Finally, a traveler seeing her plight stopped and took the time to help her gather all of her merchandise and place it in her stand. She thanked him for helping and asked him a simple question prior to his departure, "are you Jesus?" How many opportunities do we miss on a regular basis because we are so self absorbed or just too busy to take the time to show others the Jesus who lives in us?

Initially, Jesus' followers waited together for empowerment from God, which occurred on Pentecost, the Feast of First-fruits (Acts 1:8, 14; 2:1–47). *After being empowered*, they ministered together with one heart and mind providing a great witness,

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All those who were trusting (God) were together and had all things common, and were selling and dividing their possessions and property (giving) to each one according to whatever he or she had need; and throughout each day they were together of one mind in the Temple, and breaking bread from house to house, receiving (eating) food *with great joy* and humility of heart praising God and having grace toward all people. And the Lord was placing those who were being saved throughout each day together. Acts 2:44–47

They did not sell *all* their possessions, *nor* was it mandatory to sell any of their possessions to be part of the Church (e.g. Acts 5:4). In reality, Christ’s first-century followers still had personal property including homes, yet they had relinquished their personal ownership of all over to God (cf. Luke 14:33). They were striving to be good stewards of everything under their personal authority.

We observe that as Christ’s followers were filled with the Holy Spirit (born from above, born of the Spirit), they were willing *to share* with others. A proper relationship with God, which is built on love, taught them to be genuinely concerned for people who were not part of their immediate biological families. Jesus gave everything including His life to help everyone. Jesus is still giving of Himself to lead the Church. Out of a growing love for God and others, Jesus’ disciples are learning to give as God gives. Many of Christ’s early followers lived out a close-knit unity with one heart and mind (Acts 2:42f; 4:32f). As they learned to love as God loves, they naturally followed Jesus working as “one” in godly unity within His family (John 17:11, 20–23).

As Jesus’ disciples proclaimed God’s love, they were in reality proclaiming His holiness, His loving righteous way of life. Love and righteousness go hand-in-hand (Matt 22:37–40; Gal 5:14). God’s love for all establishes His standards of righteousness. God’s righteous standards also bring about wrath/judgement concluding in death, separation from God, for all who reject His loving holy way of life (Rom 6:23).

Therefore, in order to proclaim the Gospel, like Jesus' closest first-century disciples, ***Jesus' twenty-first century disciples must declare God's holiness, as part of the Gospel Message.*** The Gospel declares God's love and righteous work on everyone's behalf along with His desire for everyone to turn to Him in order to be saved from the corruption of sin, which brings eternal judgement (Rom 1:16–17; 6:1–7). Sin must be forsaken and eventually eradicated. The whole purpose of God's death is to provide a way for those wanting to live with God in His eternal family to experience a purification (justification) whereby sin is removed and each one's corrupted nature is restored to holiness (2 Cor 5:17–21; Col 2:13–14). Living in holiness is what provides eternal peace in Heaven. God's children will be perfected as God is perfect (Lev 19:2; Rev 22:14–15).

***Christ's followers should be engaging their cultures*** in order to teach God's holiness and plan of redemption to all who will listen. The New Testament is full of historical occurrences where Jesus' followers helped as many as possible realize that their world views were incorrect as they shared the reality of God, His holy ways, and His plan of redemption. Over the centuries, many have followed Christ and proclaimed God's righteousness including His work of redemption for all. ***Our generation must do the same!***

It is never easy to take a firm stand where you live or travel and proclaim God's righteousness to people who are enjoying sin, which only lasts for a season. Sin produces corruption and eventual death, if one does not turn to God. Not only will Christ's followers be unpopular much of the time, there will be times when Satan will encourage those not following God to persecute those who are. But, as Paul taught, if Christ's followers do not proclaim the Gospel, how will those traveling on the Wide Road to Destruction understand what is really going on (Rom 10:14)?

### ***Being Committed***

***It takes courage and commitment to step out in faith and teach God's Word when it is unpopular, but under God's leadership and empowerment, some will listen and be saved.*** A German, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was a faithful follower of Jesus

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during the years leading up to WWII and was martyred in a concentration camp located at Flossenbug on April 9, 1945 just before the end of the war in Europe.<sup>36</sup> Bonhoeffer's life was one of engaging his culture and speaking out against the terrible things that Hitler and many of his German leaders were doing. Many of his own countrymen would not speak out against Hitler either because of fear of loss including life or possible loss of personal gain that might be obtained by following him.

Bonhoeffer called many of His countryman to task for not following Christ's teachings and wrote a book titled *The Cost of Discipleship* reminding people that following Jesus required commitment and action.<sup>37</sup> After spending a couple years suffering in German prisons as he moved closer and closer to being executed, Bonhoeffer came to realize that following Jesus depended wholeheartedly on turning one's life over to God. Christ's followers need to live life out as fully as possible trusting God *unreservedly* in all circumstances. He came to realize that repentance was a true turning to God, a throwing oneself in the arms of God. By turning to God and depending on Him fully, one became a true follower of Christ, *a renewed man of God*. He came to realize that God—no matter what the circumstances—would lead him and all of Christ's followers home to Himself.<sup>38</sup>

If we wish to know and do God's will today, we must do as Jesus' followers of previous generations have done. Until Jesus returns, the Church is the only likeness of God's nature that the world will see. We must allow God to grow our concern for all. Our greatest witness will come as we come to realize who we are in Christ and act together as the reconciled children of God that we are. *Godly unity and corresponding peace will not come to individuals except through Jesus Christ* (Gal 3:26–28). Jesus' followers, knowing that ***eternal separation from God is the worst thing that can happen to anyone***, should exert time, energy, and resources to make God and His Creation known to as many as will listen.

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## Let's Glorify God

Jesus, "In this way my Father is glorified: that you bear much fruit indeed being my disciples."

John 15:8

In reality, as Jesus' followers are lead by the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:14), they reveal God's loving and righteous nature through their actions and words to all, and some who have not known God come to realize that He is good and just with abundant loving-kindness toward all. He is glorious. As Jesus' followers of all generations proclaim God's loving nature to a world corrupted by sin, some realize that God is worthy to follow and turn from Satan and his deceptions to Him for a much better life now and forever.

Jesus taught that the religious leaders of His day were not caring for the people in a godly caring manner and, therefore, were going to lose their priestly authority. Their authority would be given to a people who would follow Him producing the fruit of the Kingdom of God (Matt 21:43). The fruit of the Kingdom of God is spiritual birth for all who learn to submit to God. God is worthy of volunteer submission. Jesus asks those from every generation who are willing to follow His leadership to die to self and bring as many as will listen to God to join His eternal family. As Jesus' followers follow Him, they experience with Him His greatest joy (John 12:24-25; 15:5, 11; 17:13).

Jesus said that His disciples would do greater works than He did while on earth referring to their future work with Him as they worked under His leadership bringing many into God's eternal family and kingdom (John 14:12). Just as Jesus called many from the first century into obedient discipleship as they learned to return God's love and love their fellow man (1 John 4:10-16), He calls obedient disciples from every successive

generation to proclaim the good news of His growing kingdom and eternal holy family. Jesus' followers know that the Gospel message is empowered by God and that God's way of life is the only way whereby people can find inner peace and godly joy now and forever (Rom 1:16; 6:22; 7:4; 8:23; Col 1:3-6).

### **The Church's Greatest Mission**

***The Father's greatest mission is also His family's greatest mission.*** The Father's greatest mission is to bring as many as will listen to Him into His eternal close-knit holy family (John 3:16–17; 2 Peter 3:9). The Father desires that all come to a place of turning from their individual desires and aspirations to Him and His way of life (Matt 11:28–30; Luke 9:23; 2 Peter 3:9). Those who listen become part of His loving eternal family. Christ gave His life to help fulfill the Father's greatest mission. Christ's followers are to do their part in leading the lost to God.

Jesus understood His incarnate mission even prior to the physical creation of the universe (Rev 13:8; Acts 2:22–23), which He spoke into existence under the Father's guidance (John 1:1–3; Heb 1:2). When a religious leader, Nicodemus, came to Jesus to understand His messianic saving work, Jesus told him that ***it was necessary for one to be born a second time through the Holy Spirit in order to see and enter the Kingdom of God*** (John 3:3, 5). He went on to tell Nicodemus that ***it was necessary that He, the Son of God, die in order that those who were trusting God could be born a second time providing salvation*** for all those who were trusting God (John 3:14–15). This would be their spiritual birth into God's eternal holy family. He went on to say that His Heavenly Father loved everyone so much that He had sent Him into the world at just the right time to do just that (John 3:16–17; Gal 4:4–5). As Jesus came to the point of completing the main part of His mission and dying for all (John 13:1, 3), He prayed that His followers would experience the fulness of joy that He was experiencing ***as He looked beyond*** the pain and humiliation of dying on a cross to the salvation that He was making available for all who learned to trust God throughout the entire creation (past,

present, and future) (John 17:13; Heb 12:2; cf. Heb 10:4–14). For those who willingly die to self and follow Jesus, they experience Jesus' joy leading others to God (John 15:5, 11).

***Knowing God's love and Jesus' main mission helps Jesus' followers die daily to self and be a great witness as they join God in His life transforming work.*** As Jesus' disciples learn to hear and obey His voice more fully, they have a closer and closer fellowship with God and one another and become much more effective in witnessing and making disciples. There are many within our families, local churches, and local communities who need to know God. These people comprise our *daily* mission fields. They need to see God at work in and through us as we minister to their physical and spiritual needs (Matt 25:34–40; 28:18–20). One of Max Lucado's books, *Out Live Your Life: You Were Made To Make a Difference*, offers some sound reflection with practical examples on how Christ's followers should be helping those around them.<sup>39</sup>

### Experiencing Jesus' Joy: a Second Look

Without Jesus' victory over spiritual death, no one would ever be eternally completed in God's image according to His likeness and live with Him forever. The writer of the letter of Hebrews stated that because of the joy of making it possible for all to be rescued, saved from the deadly consequences of sin (Col 1:13; 1Thess 1:10), Jesus suffered a death on a cross despising the shame of dying as a common criminal (Heb 12:1–3; cf. Gal 3:13–14). His joy was made full through His sacrificial work on everyone's behalf because He was saving those whom He loves deeply. ***There is no greater joy*** than helping save those whom you love dearly from a present life of continual ongoing sin and an eternal life of suffering and shame. If you are following Jesus, you will lead others to God, and you will experience joy with God, who dwells within you, as He and His faithful angels rejoice over every person who turns to Him (Luke 15:7, 10, 31–32).

*If you desire to experience more love, joy, and inner peace, let God show you the spiritual **importance of your participation** in*

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*building His eternal kingdom and eternal caring family.* God shows all who listen the importance of submitting to His will, dying to self, and receiving the mind of Christ, which allows one to experience Jesus' joy as they help others turn to God (1 Cor 2:7, 12, 16). Paul uses the idea of "having been crucified with Christ" to help express the idea of giving up one's personal ambitions and desires in order to complete God's work to help the world know Him (Gal 2:19–20). Paul's dying to self and suffering on behalf of those who would listen to God brought him great joy (Col 1:24). This is the same for all of Christ's followers. As Christ lives in a close relationship with each of His followers helping them to know and do the Father's will, they learn to die to self and experience much more joy than is possible by doing things that are pleasing to self.

Jesus' very life was fulfilled by pleasing His Heavenly Father (John 4:34). He experienced great levels of inner peace and joy through consistently and obediently remaining in His Father's love. Jesus' followers may also experience this great inner peace and joy by obediently remaining in Jesus' love (John 15:10).

As each of us considers our own individual lives, it would be good to come to the point of realizing that each one of us has a limited amount of time on this side of eternity to help others know God. So, what will we do with our time? Will we waste it spending it all on ourselves and families, or will we give some back to God as we seek to please the One from whom all blessings flow and who created us to be part of His eternal family?

### A Work of Love: the Great Commission

Prior to His ascension to rule Heaven and Earth from the right hand of His Father, Jesus said to His immediate and all future disciples,

All authority in Heaven and on Earth has been given to me. Therefore, while living out your lives, ***make disciples*** of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to keep all that I commanded you.

And behold! I am with you all every day until the completion of the Age. Matt 28:18–20

During this Age of Grace, the Messianic Age, Jesus commands all of His followers to make disciples from *all* nations of the world. *Originating out of God's love for all, this is the one overarching command given to all.*

As Christ's followers live out their lives daily learning to love God and fellow man more fully, they proclaim the Gospel Message, the Good News, through their *actions as well as their words* and develop disciples from all who receive Jesus as lord and savior. *Each of Christ's followers have the honor and privilege of participating with God in His ongoing Creation* inviting all to receive Him into His eternal close-knit holy family. Through the Holy Spirit's convicting work and through Jesus Christ's ongoing leadership and ministry through His followers, some start walking with God heading Home.

### Witnessing for Jesus

*If those who have not started listening to God start to sense that Jesus' followers have a genuine love for them, there is a much better chance that they will listen.* Through the work of the Holy Spirit, God helps Christ's followers develop a genuine concern for the lost and rejoices with them as they follow His lead leading many out of darkness into His light. God enlightens and empowers Christ's followers, and as a result Christ's followers look for opportunity to engage their cultures in order to teach God's holiness *and* plan of redemption to everyone who will listen.

Even under great duress, Jesus' first-century disciples led people to God (e.g. Paul- Col 1:24; cf. 2 Cor 4:7–11; 16–18). *Our generation must do the same!* We must come to understand more fully and intensely within our hearts as well as our minds that *eternal separation from God is the worst thing that can happen to anyone.* As we come to understand the importance of Jesus' command *to make disciples*, it becomes apparent that we should understand some of the basics of sharing the truth of God's

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creation with others. Most witnessing is basically being willing *to share Life* with those around us in our everyday interactions (John 14:6). Jesus teaches us that as we learn to trust and obey Him out of love (not fear), we will do the works that He has done but even on a greater level because He is with the Father leading us (John 14:12). As we learn to love others and share the truth about how much God loves all, God adds daily to His family those who learn to return His love.

### Intentional Witnessing

God uses the Holy Spirit and Christ's followers to help everyone know reality including His redeeming work for all:

- (1) through *the Holy Spirit's personal teaching* about the creation (Rom 1:18-32; 2:11-16; cf 1 John 2:27);
- (2) through *the Holy Spirit's convicting teaching* regarding sin, righteousness, and the judgement to come (John 16:8-11); and
- 3) through *Christ's followers' teachings* about God and His Word through their actions as well as their words (Rom 10:14-17; cf. Matt 28:18-20).

As Christ's followers share the Good News with those not following Jesus, and tell about: (1) God's love, (2) free-will, (3) personal sin, (4) God's redeeming work, and (5) personal repentance, each one hearing the Gospel is personally responsible for their response. As Christ's followers share, those who hear go through times of spiritual awakening. During these times of spiritual awakening, each person has an opportunity to realize the damaging effect of personal sin and make a conscious decision to turn from self to God (repentance). Even if they are not consciously aware of what God is forcing them to consider, they are required to count the cost of submitting to Him and following Jesus and then must make a decision to either receive or reject Him—making no decision is the same as rejecting God (2 Peter 3:9; Luke 14:26-33; Rom 10:9).

## Basic Scripture for a Gospel Presentation

When presenting the Gospel to someone, you should be sensitive to where the other is in their understanding of God. The range can vary significantly from some who are deceived to the point of thinking that there is no creator to those who know that God exists and loves them deeply but do not want to submit to His lordship. Every time that anyone witnesses, they will be confronted with a unique person. Christ's followers should be prepared to customize their Gospel presentation according to the unique place that the one receiving the Good News is at.

In any and all cases, there are some basic biblical principles discussed below that everyone should know. Everyone should be ready to discuss the basics of God's free-willed creation and redemptive work, which is available to all. Many of the passages supporting these foundation truths do not need to be memorized, but there are some that should be memorized as discussed below.

In most Gospel presentations, it is normally good to start with an overview of God's creation as described in Genesis chapters one through three. The main purpose of the Creation was to create a free-willed volunteer family for God. Mankind was created in God's image according to His likeness (Gen 1:26–27) with the ability to obey or disobey Him (Gen 2:16–17). God is ultimately seeking a mutually reciprocating relationship with His children. The first couple chose to disobey God (Gen 3:6) separating all humanity for a time from direct contact with Him (Gen 3:22–24). Prior to the beginning of the physical Creation with God knowing all things in advance, the Father working with His Son and the Holy Spirit planned out His Son's death in order to remove sin and its effects from those who would receive them into their lives as lord and savior (Acts 2:22–24; Rev 13:8). When God has finished adding members to His eternal holy family, he will finalize His Creation through perfection (sinlessness) and a final eternal form (resurrected body) for all who received Him (2 Cor 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24; Phil 3:20–21; cf. 1 Thess 4:13–17) and judgement for all who did not (2 Peter 3:7; Rev 20:11–15).

The heart of the Gospel message is about how the Son of God, the Messiah Jesus, willingly died on a cross suffering shame

and pain (Heb 12:2) so that all who learn to trust and obey God would have their sins removed along with all propensity to sin (Rom 8:28–30; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24). This incredible miracle came at a great cost to God through the suffering and separation of the Father and Son during the Son's three days in Hades (Sheol) paying the penalty for our sins (separation from His Heavenly Father) (Acts 2:23–36). The Good News is that although *all* have sinned and fallen short of living in perfect godly holiness (Rom 3:23) resulting in eternal separation from God (Rom 6:23), everyone of all ages can be made complete with total sin removal by learning to return God's love (1 John 4:10–16) and to trust and obey Him (John 3:16; 36; 14:23; 15:10). God gives His trusting and obedient children a spiritual birth into His family (Eph 1:13–14; Rom 8:14; John 1:11–12), and they become new (2 Cor 5:17) having the developing mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16). After being born spiritually into God's eternal close-knit holy family, out of a genuine growing love and concern for others, Christ's followers begin to do their part in leading others to God so that as many as possible may be saved (Matt 28:18–20).

There is a graphics presentation of the Gospel in *Appendix A*, which is located at the back of this book. Some of the most important scripture regarding the Gospel message have asterisks placed in front of them. If you do not have these critical verses memorized, prayerfully consider doing so. ***Jesus' death on a cross is the only bridge*** between fallen man's eventual destiny of going to an eternal place of isolation from God commonly called Hell or turning to God through Christ and receiving a sinless eternal life with God (John 14:6; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24). When individuals turn from self to God (repentance) and ask God to forgive their sins and lead their lives (2 Peter 3:9; Rom 10:4), they are ushered into God's eternal close-knit holy family through spiritual birth (John 1:11–13; 3:3, 5; Eph 1:13–14), which is made possible through Jesus' atoning death (John 3:14–16). Eventually all of God's children will be in His eternal presence in the New Heaven and Earth living with Him in their perfected resurrected bodies (Rev 21:1–6; Phil 3:20–21).

### Conversational Witnessing

Mark Mittelberg and Bill Hybel, in their book, *Becoming a Contagious Christian*, discuss how easily Christ's followers can intentionally witness. They state that witnessing should be motivated by love (John 3:16–17; 2 Cor 5:14; 1 John 4:10–19). Because God is relational and has created his children to be relational, take the time to build relationships as you look for opportunities to discuss God's great love and corresponding righteous actions for all. It is also important to remember that most of the people that we come in contact with notice what we do as well as what we say. It is important to live a holy life that accurately expresses God's caring nature.<sup>40</sup>

Later in their book, Mittelberg, Strobel, and Hybel discuss another important concept that should be considered: how does one move from the natural to the spiritual in everyday conversations? They discuss the idea of looking for ways to build a communication bridge from the natural to the spiritual.<sup>41</sup> In some cases, individuals have already started listening to the Holy Spirit and are eager to discuss God. But, normally, you will need to figure out how to transition the conversation from our natural world to speaking about God. You will need to come up with a statement or pose a question involving God to see if the other person has any desire to speak about spiritual matters. It could be as simple as saying something like, "I do not know what I would do without God's guidance and help." If the person is receptive, then you will be able to develop a spiritual conversation through God's leading to see how far you should continue the conversation.

With so many things going on in our lives, the most important part of witnessing is being willing and intentionally open to God's leading at any moment during the day. ***Be intentionally ready to initiate a spiritual conversation!*** Then as the Holy Spirit leads, be sensitive to the length and depth of each witnessing encounter. I have had times where I have only felt God's leading to speak to someone about Him for a few minutes, and at other times, I have spoken for hours. God will show you through the other's actions and words how long and on what level you should discuss Him.

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From my personal experiences, it has normally been fairly straightforward to start a spiritual discussion based on personal or shared events. In many cases, as you are developing a closer relationship with someone, God will help you make timely transitions into spiritual discussions. As you are developing godly relationships with others, it is good to introduce them to others who are also followers of Christ so that they are able to see more clearly what following Jesus might look like. For some, it may be as easy as simply inviting them to go with you to some function where Christ can be discussed including personal dinners or home gatherings, church services, Bible studies, and/or special events.

There are many helpful books and videos available that discuss the various ways to witness *intentionally* to others. A couple additional books to consider are Bill Hybels' *Just Walk Across the Room*, and Dick Innes' *I Hate Witnessing*.<sup>42</sup> If you seek God to help you tell others about Him, He will empower you and show you how to witness effectively taking into consideration your unique personality.

### Developing & Multiplying Disciples

And Christ gave on the one hand apostles, but on the other prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers for the establishing of His Holy Ones (Saints) for the work of the Ministry for the building up of the Body of Christ, until we all come, to the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect (complete) man, to a measure of the maturity of the fulness of Christ.

Eph 4:11–13

As we allow Jesus to lead us, He teaches us to do God's good works. A great part of that work is developing God's family so that Christ's followers can collectively take care of one another and become productive witnesses. God wants those who are more mature in His family to help those who are less mature. After leading people to Christ, it is very important that the more mature teach the less mature how to live out *all* that Jesus commanded.

In his book, *The Journey*, Billy Graham reminds us that people who have recently turned to follow Christ are in reality like newborn children regarding their understanding of spiritual things.<sup>43</sup> There may be barriers to spiritual growth such as continuing sin, ungodly pressure from family members, friends, or associates, or uncertainty in what is expected.<sup>44</sup> Christ's more mature followers should be teaching and guiding (being a mentor) those who are less mature. It is a privilege for the more mature to help the less mature grow more and more into the likeness of Christ.

It is Christ's more mature followers' *duty, honor, and privilege* to help those who are less mature grow in their understanding and walk with Christ and others (Matt 28:20; Acts 2:42). Christ's more mature followers should be providing regular times of collective worship, regular small group meetings, Bible studies, specialized discipleship classes, and actual times of active ministry to help the entire Body grow. If the mature members do not help make and develop new disciples *including their own children*, who will know God, and who from our future generations will follow Jesus and explain God's great ongoing love and redemptive work to the lost of their generations?

### Reading God's Word Accurately

It is important that *all* of Jesus' followers continually remain in God's inspired authoritative Word, the Bible, reading and living it out (John 8:31b–32; Rom 12:1–2). If they do not, Satan will slowly but surely recondition their minds toward accepting His lies and deceptions (John 8:43–44; 2 Cor 11:13–15). Knowing that Christ wants all of His followers to become more and more like Him should bring everyone to the place of reading God's Word daily and being in touch at all times with Him through ongoing open ended prayer. Prayer should be a two way street all of the time, one of listening as well as speaking (2 Thess 5:17). ***Staying in God's Word, praying without ceasing, and keeping an open, obedient mind to God's leading is critical for the success of all Christ's followers.***

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As Christ's followers study God's authoritative Word and step out in faith and implement what it says following the leading of the Holy Spirit, they will come to know God's will more fully. It is important when studying God's Word not to misread it by forcing it to say something other than what it means trying to match what you have been taught by others or what you might prefer it to mean. It is critical for all who want to understand God's Word to allow God to teach them *what He is saying* through those who wrote under His inspiration. It is a common mistake to read into God's Word what we want instead of allowing God to teach us accurately what He is actually saying.

As you study God's Word, you may wish to have one or two good literal translations (formal equivalents) such as a New American Standard Bible (NASB) and/or an English Standard Version (ESV) and one linguistically reconstructed translation (functional equivalent) such as the NIV, which rephrases the original text into wording that is more commonly used today. Take note that the translation committees for linguistically reconstructed translations such as the NIV have already made considerable translation decisions for its readers as they translate the original languages for you. Personally, I would avoid the TNIV (Today's New International Version) because of its gender leveling, which distorts some of God's Word. The Living translations, sometimes called paraphrased translations, are useful for gaining *overall* perspective, but I do not recommend them for in-depth understanding due to their loss of detail from God's original wording. Keep in mind that ***the Holy Spirit is the final guide to proper understanding as you read the translations of your choice and seek truth*** (1 John 2:27; cf. 2 Tim 3:16–17; John 8:31b-32).

In addition to using a couple good translations, there are many good biblical study aids available such as Bible dictionaries, concordances, and commentaries that are very helpful in understanding the historical, cultural, and religious context and other concepts from ancient biblical times that span several thousand years. There are other aids that may help individuals understand the various literary forms (genres) along with historical and literary contextual fundamentals. One such book is Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart's *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth*.<sup>45</sup> It is a practical short guide to general biblical interpretive principles, but it also contains some cultural bias that distorts

Scripture—let the Holy guide you as you read. If we listen to God, He will help us know truth (1 John 2:27). Part of Jesus' mission was to bear witness to truth (John 18:37; cf. 8:31b-32).

At all times, continue to listen, read, and live out God's Word. God speaks mightily to each of His children through His Word and continual leading helping them to understand reality and His desire for each of our lives (Heb 4:12). Listen to your preacher(s), join a local church Bible fellowship-study group, consider other Bible studies as led by the Spirit, and most importantly, ***do what God tells you through His Word and direct leading***. Many fail to grow in their walk with God simply because they do not implement what He teaches (Heb 5:14).

### Closing Thoughts

Most of us sense that life is something more than a fleeting time on earth prior to death. This is because life is eternal. God the Creator, who is eternal, created both the angels and humans as free-willed eternal beings and possibly the rest of the heavenly beings known through Scripture. It is clear from Scripture that humanity and angels have been given free-will. Each has to decide whether or not they want to live with God under His love and lordship or be isolated from Him forever.

When we consider the big picture, we want to thank God for His holy nature and creating us to be an intimate part of His eternal life. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit comprise a living "oneness," a godly unity, that is held together with perfect love absent of all sin. There are no divisions within their intimate holy relationship. We were created in God's image according to His likeness to be part of their intimate holy family. Through free-will, everyone has been marred and everyone's nature struggles with self-centeredness, but God works with all helping those who listen to turn from their self-centered, selfish ways of life to His way of life, which is based on mutual equal love for all. God asks everyone from every generation to turn from self-centeredness and choose eternal life with Him.

God's desire for all is for everyone to choose good over evil (bad). In one sense, life is simpler than we imagine, because

each individual's decision regarding living for self or community determines his or her own eternal destiny. For those who choose to receive God as lord and savior, they are choosing good over evil. They are choosing what is good for self *and for* others. For those who choose self *over* others, they are choosing an empty life that leads to an eternal life of suffering and shame.

As each one of us journey through this part of eternity, God reveals Himself in a multitude of ways wanting all to know Him (spiritual awakenings). To personally know God helps one to submit to His will and confidently follow His lead. Until one knows God and His genuine love for all, it is easier to follow a self-centered path without submitting to Him. But, once an individual has started paying attention to God's revelation of His world and Word, many of Satan's deceptions and his/her own personal self-centered desires become apparent making it much easier to submit to Him. He is a loving holy Father and Sustainer, who is worthy of respect and honor (reverence).

*Can you think of anything more glorious than God and His eternal close-knit holy family?* I cannot. What a privilege and honor to be invited into God's holy family to be loved by our Heavenly Father as much as He loves Jesus. What a privilege and honor to be able to join God in the greatest rescue mission of all eternity helping lead people away from Satan's deceptions into God's marvelous presence and light.

If we stay on the wide road to destruction, we will miss all of the great opportunities that God has for us now and forever. But, if we listen to God and turn to Him, He will start transforming our lives immediately to be more and more like His. We will have the honor and privilege of following Jesus Christ, the Son of the Most High and the joy of seeing transformed lives.

The only way that Jesus' followers can experience the fulness of the joy that Jesus experienced at the Cross—and still does as He leads His Church—is to step out into the ongoing spiritual battle and ***join God in the greatest rescue mission of eternity***. Out of a growing genuine love for others, Christ's followers experience great godly joy by being part of God's family *and* helping rescue those whom they have come to love. ***There is no greater joy than leading others to God to be saved from unholy living now and the ultimate disaster of eternal separation from God.***

It is my personal prayer that reading this book has helped you desire a closer relationship with God as a member of His growing eternal close-knit holy family. If you have not done so yet, it is now time for you to seek God's will in knowing and doing your part in building His eternal family. ***As you submit more fully to Christ's leadership and His appointed Church leaders, your level of inner peace and joy will continue to grow. As you lead others out of their spiritual darkness—which has been created by self-centeredness, selfishness, and Satan's deceptions—into the marvelous light of God's presence, your joy will become more and more like Christ's.*** Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who leads all who will follow Him into the joyous presence of our Eternal Father and Heavenly Family.

If I do not personally meet you on this side of eternity, I want you to know that it is my prayer that you have an exciting and rich life "in Christ." May we continue to listen to our Heavenly Father as He leads and guides us in helping others to know the reality of His caring nature and His desire for all to join Him with Christ at that grand Passover banquet at the completion of the Creation when all of God's close-knit holy eternal family will celebrate God's love together. Let's all remember that when God's people obediently listen to Him and reveal His wondrous nature to the world around them through their actions as well as their words, some people are saved from their ***present and eternal*** suffering and shame and our lands are blessed.

***Thank God for Jesus!***



## Appendix: Christ's Followers Proclaim that Jesus Is the Only Way (John 14:6)!

### God's Creation: a Close-knit Eternal Holy Family

With free-will came disobedience, sin.

With sin, God's main message to all has been: repent!

**(Repent: Turn from self to God & His way of life)**

Matt 3:2; 4:17; Acts 2:38; 2 Peter 3:9

### God's Eternal Presence

&

**The New Heaven & Earth**

2 Peter 3:10–13; Rev 21:1–6

Be holy because God is holy-Lev 19:2

God's nature is pure love-

1 John 4:16

God's love draws some to Him

John 3:16–17; 15:12–13

Jesus' atoning  
sin removal for

John 1:12; Gal 3:13

2 Cor 5:21;

Col 2:13–14

death provides  
all receiving Him

-14; 1 Cor 15:50–57

1 Peter 2:24

Phil 3:20–21

Eternal Life: Rom 10:9; John 14:6

Rev 3:20

Eternal Life starts now!

Rom 6:20–22; Gal 5:22–23

1 John 3:1–2; 2 Cor 5:17–21

Eternal Life is for those who  
are learning to return God's  
love- Rom 8:28–30

James 1:12; 2:5; 1 John 4:19

If Jesus does not become lord and savior, one's  
sin separates him from God leading to eternal  
separation in Hell: Rom 3:23; 6:23; Rev 20:11f.

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### Notes

1. For more detail here or for other important ideas taught in this book, see James B. Joseph, *Experiencing Jesus' Joy* (Lynchburg: Liberty University Press, 2013). See regular text and endnotes.
2. For additional reading regarding the sharing of Jesus' glory with all who learn to trust and obey God, see James B. Joseph, *Unity and Obedient Discipleship in John 17* (Saarbrücken: LAMBERT Academic Publishing, 2016) and *Victory in Jesus: Being a Child of God* (Kings Mountain: Drawbridge Publishing, 1997).
3. Constantine Scouteris, "The People of God—Its Unity and Its Glory: A Discussion of John 17:17–24 in the Light of Patristic Thought," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 30, no. 4 (Winter 1985): 399–414.
4. Scouteris, "The People of God," 401–01.
5. Scouteris, "The People of God," 403.
6. Scouteris, "The People of God," 405-06.
7. Scouteris, "The People of God," 407.
8. Scouteris, "The People of God," 411.
9. Scouteris, "The People of God," 414.
10. C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1953, reprint 1958), 187–200; cf. John 14:20.
11. Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 196
12. Dodd, *Interpretations of the Fourth Gospel*, 197
13. See Gary Chapman and Arlene Pellican, "Screen Time and Shyness; Screen Time and the Brain," *growing up social* (Chicago: Northfield, 2014).
14. Josh McDowell, *A Ready Defense* (San Bernardino: Here's Life, 1990, reprint 1991).
15. C. Mark Corts, *The Truth about Spiritual Warfare: Your Place in the Battle Between God and Satan* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006).
16. Compare Matt 25:41; Rev 19:20; 20:10, 14–15. Starting in Isa 14:11, we see a "worm," (in the singular) being used as a covering for those in Sheol. From other Scripture, this would take place in the lower depths of Sheol for the unfaithful. The same words are used in the Hebrew and Greek in Isaiah 66:24 to represent the worm that shall not die for those being tormented forever. God uses the same imagery and wording in Mark 9:43–48 to help all who are listening understand the disgrace and pain of living in Gehenna, in the Kingdom of Hell.

17. Acts 2:27 is a good Scripture to compare to Ps 16:10 in the Greek version of the Old Testament (Septuagint) and the Hebrew version of the Old Testament. Peter is quoting David here and so when we look at Greek and Hebrew versions, we see that those reading the Greek Bible in the first century would have seen the same Greek word that Peter used, *haidēs*, “Hades,” and those reading from the Hebrew Bible would have seen, *Sheol*, which shows the equivalency of the two words.

18. Ignatius of Antioch, “To the Trallians,” Long Version, Book 2, 2.9.4. This matches Scripture such as Acts 2:27, 31 and Eph 4:8–10.

19. One website shows some of our worlds tallest buildings with the highest in Dubai, UAE (United Arab Emirates) with a height of 2717 ft. finished in 2010, that is a little over one half mile tall (5280 ft./mi.) and the second tallest in Taipei, Taiwan with a height of 1670 ft. finished in 2004, accessed June 26, 2015, URL: <http://architecture.about.com/od/skyscrapers/a/Worlds-Tallest-Buildings.htm>.

20. Billy Graham, *The Journey: How To Live by Faith in an Uncertain World* (Nashville: W Publishing, 2006), has a thought provoking chapter, “Can We Start Over?” Many people have been deceived by Satan into thinking that they cannot start over, but this is one of his many lies. God desires all to turn to Him and be saved (John 3:16; 2 Peter 3:9).

21. Billy Graham, *How To Be Born Again* (Waco: Word Books, 1977), 152–53.

22. Billy Graham, *Just As I Am: the Autobiography of Billy Graham* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 26–27.

23. Graham, *Just As I Am*, 28.

24. Graham, *Just As I Am*, 29-30.

25. Graham, *Just As I Am*, 30.

26. Bush, *Decision Points*, 31.

27. Bush, *Decision Points*, 30.

28. James M. Boice, *Christ’s Call to Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Grason, 1986), 139.

29. Boice, *Christ’s Call to Discipleship*, 35.

30. Kyle Idleman, *Not a Fan: Becoming a Completely Committed Follower of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 11–13.

31. Kyle, *Not a Fan*, 14-15.

32. Kyle, *Not a Fan*, 158-61.

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33. James B. Joseph, *No More Walls! Creation of One New Man in Christ: Ephesians 2:11–22* (Saarbrücken: LAMBERT Academic Publishing, 2015), 25–62.
34. Billy Graham, *The Journey*, 62.
35. Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *Beyond Belief to Convictions* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 2002), 296.
36. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters & Papers from Prison*, rev. ed., ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 411.
37. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995).
38. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 369–70.
39. Max Lucado, *Out Live Your Life* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010).
40. Bill Hybels and Mark Mittleburg, *Becoming a Contagious Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 67ff.
41. Hybels and Mittleburg, *Becoming a Contagious Christian*, 135ff.
42. Bill Hybels, *Just Walk Across the Room: Simple Steps Pointing People to Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006);  
Dick Innes, *I Hate Witnessing: A Handbook for Effective Christian Communications*. rev. ed. (San Clemente: Acts Communications, 2003).
43. Graham, *The Journey*, 74–76.
44. Graham, *The Journey*, 77–78. For a practical introduction to discipleship, consider working through Henry Blackaby's 13 week course, *Experiencing God*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2008).
45. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

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