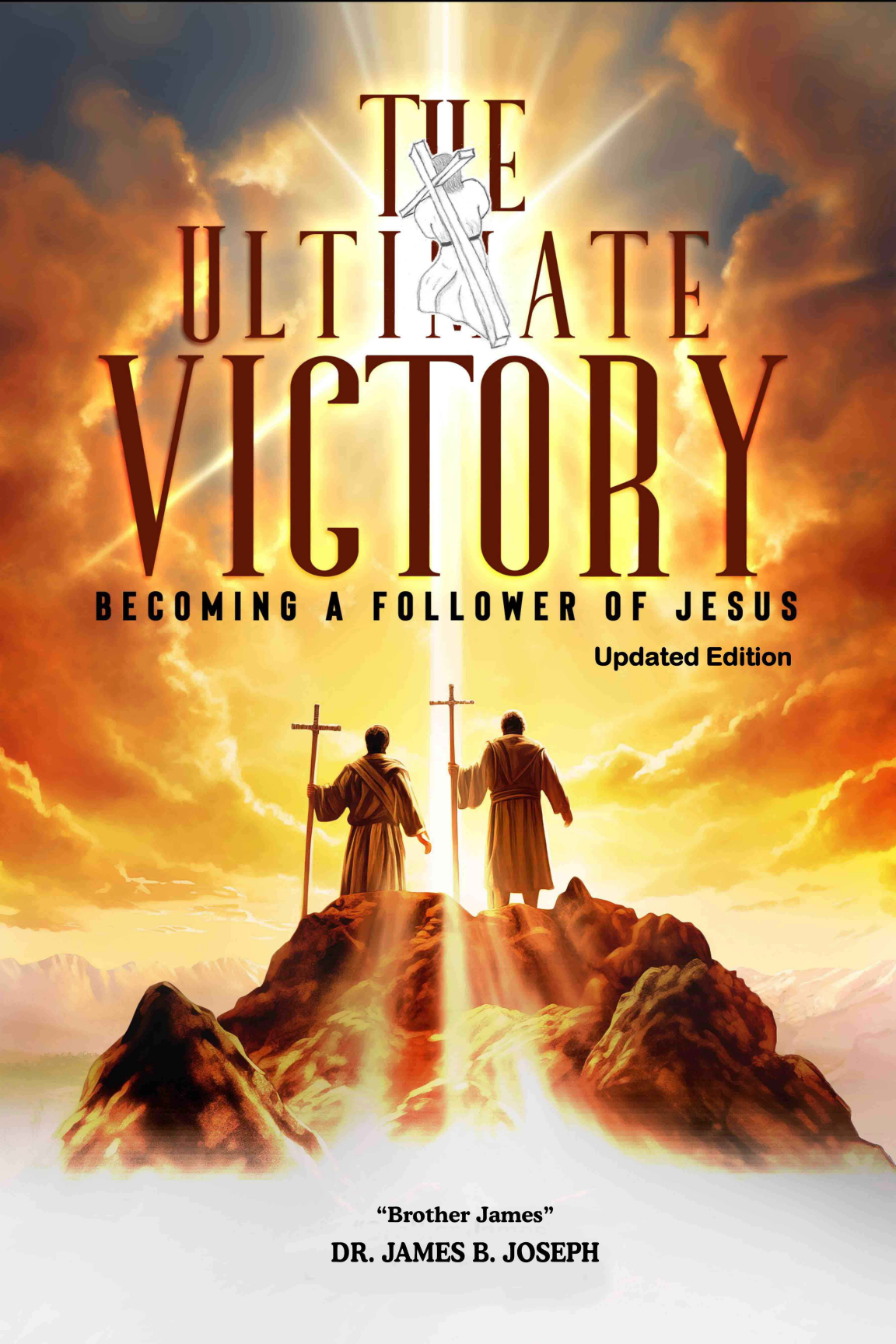


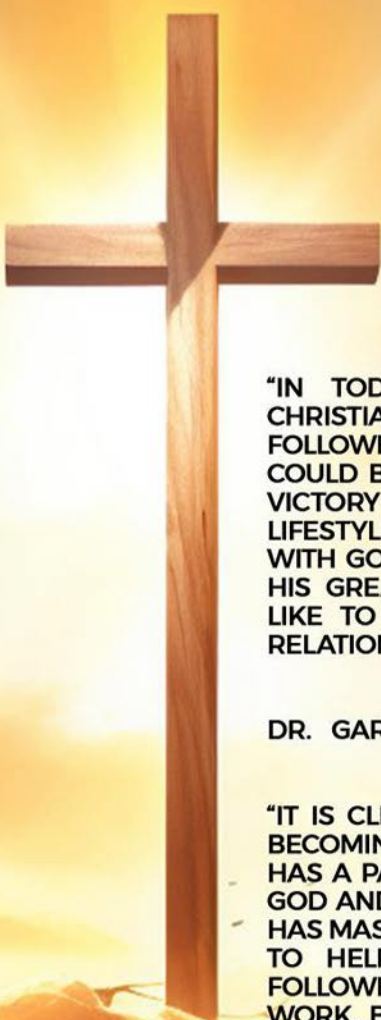


THE ULTIMATE VICTORY

BECOMING A FOLLOWER OF JESUS

Updated Edition

"Brother James"
DR. JAMES B. JOSEPH



THE ULTIMATE VICTORY

BECOMING A FOLLOWER OF JESUS

"IN TODAY'S WORLD, MANY PEOPLE VIEW THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION AS A SET OF RITUALS TO BE FOLLOWED TO GAIN GOD'S APPROVAL. NOTHING COULD BE FURTHER FROM THE TRUTH. THE ULTIMATE VICTORY SHARES THE REALITY THAT THE CHRISTIAN LIFESTYLE SHOULD BE AN ONGOING RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD AS ONE JOYFULLY FOLLOWS JESUS DUE TO HIS GREAT LOVE FOR ALL. EVERYONE WHO WOULD LIKE TO KNOW GOD BETTER AND IMPROVE THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM WILL FIND THIS BOOK EXTREMELY HELPFUL."

DR. GARY CHAPMAN, AUTHOR OF THE FIVE LOVE
LANGUAGES

"IT IS CLEAR AS ONE READS THE ULTIMATE VICTORY: BECOMING A FOLLOWER OF JESUS THAT DR. JOSEPH HAS A PASSION TO SEE INDIVIDUALS COME TO KNOW GOD AND BECOME OBEDIENT DISCIPLES OF JESUS. HE HAS MASTERFULLY AND SCHOLARLY WRITTEN A BOOK TO HELP INDIVIDUALS BECOME MORE EFFECTIVE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS. THROUGHOUT ALL OF HIS WORK, BROTHER JAMES HAS SHOWN HIMSELF TO BE ONE OF THE MORE PROLIFIC AUTHORS ON DISCIPLESHIP, AND HIS PRESENT BOOK WILL HELP EQUIP JESUS' FOLLOWERS FOR VICTORY IN THE EFFORT TO BRING THE GOSPEL TO A LOST HUMANITY FACED WITH THE DECISION OF CHOOSING GOOD OVER EVIL."

PASTOR EMERITUS, MINERAL SPRINGS BAPTIST,
DR. CECIL R. CAVE, JR., NC

Dr. Joseph, a retired pastor and seminary professor, has earned graduate degrees from Wake Forest University, Hood Theological Seminary, and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. His earlier books are: *Victory in Jesus: Being a Child of God*; *Experiencing Jesus' Joy*; *Experiencing Jesus' Joy through Obedient Discipleship*; *No More Walls!*; and *Unity and Obedient Discipleship in the Gospel of John*. He would like to see many come to know God more fully in order that they may experience a closer relationship with Him.

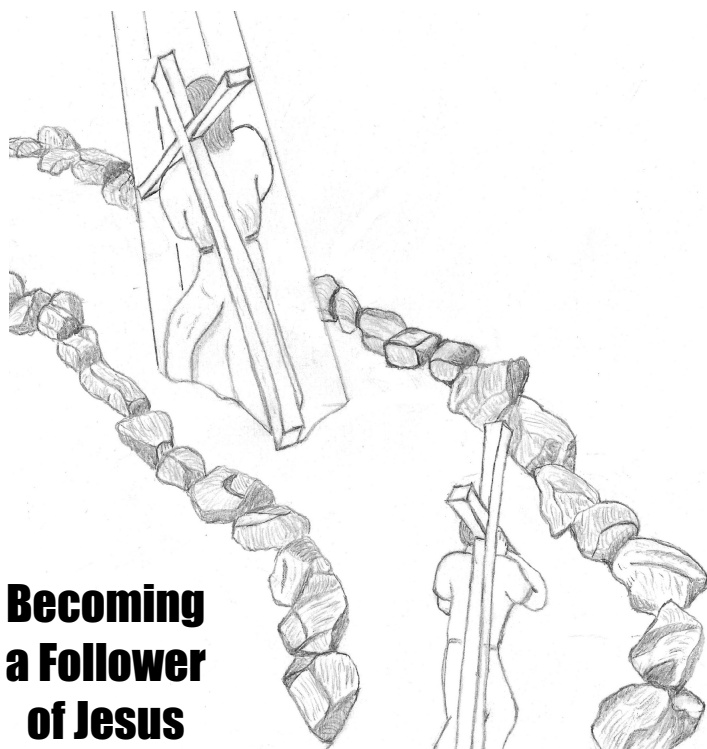
ISBN 979-8-9905963-0-6



9 798990 596306

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**Becoming
a Follower
of Jesus**

**Dr. James B. Joseph
“Brother James”**

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Updated Edition

DR. JAMES B. JOSEPH | “BROTHER JAMES”

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Hardcover ISBN: 979-8-9905963-0-6

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024909404

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Pfafftown, NC USA

**“Your Word is a lamp to my feet,
indeed, a light to my pathway!”
Psalm 119:105**

**Through the guidance
of the Father
and help of the Holy Spirit,
let's follow Jesus closely!**

Foreword

Everyone is loved by God more than any can imagine! As you journey through *The Ultimate Victory: Becoming a Follower of Jesus*, the experience should help you understand God and His Creation more fully highlighting His great love for you and His desired place for you in His eternal family resulting in a deepened personal relationship with Him. You are wonderfully made to have a nature like God Himself, but only if you allow Him to guide you into becoming a mature loving righteous person. Throughout the Creation process starting with Adam and Eve, God works continually bringing spiritual enlightenment, love, joy, and internal peace to all who listen to Him.

When one allows God to teach them how to love Him and others and truly starts trusting His leadership, He then places them into His eternal close loving righteous family.¹ ***This is described by Jesus as being “born again,”² which is the ultimate victory for any human being.*** This ultimate victory includes godly empowerment for Jesus’ followers helping them to experience more and more of His joy while carrying out their personal assignments. It sounds easy, but it is not! It is much easier to stay on the commonly shared life path that is traveled by most people ignoring God and His leading.

This book has been written to help everyone know God better. Reading through it should help you realize more fully what God is asking of each of us and what Satan is doing to quench the leading of the Holy Spirit. Following Jesus more faithfully into ongoing spiritual warfare will help free you from the bondage of self-centeredness. In the process, you will experience more of Jesus’ joy as you help others come to know God and His great desire for them to be part of His eternal holy family, which is the Crown Jewel of His Creation. Let’s not miss out on the best that our Heavenly Father has for each of us and forfeit the love, joy, inner peace, and excitement that come with faithfully following Jesus!

Bible Book Abbreviations Used & Important Notes

Old Testament

Genesis: Gen
Exodus: Exod
Leviticus: Lev
Numbers: Num
Deuteronomy: Deut
Joshua: Josh
Judges: Judg
1-2 Samuel: 1-2 Sam
1-2 Chronicles: 1-2 Chr
Nehemiah: Neh
Esther: Esth
Psalms: Ps
Proverbs: Prov
Ecclesiastes: Eccl
Isaiah: Isa
Jeremiah: Jer
Lamentations: Lam
Ezekiel: Ezek
Daniel: Dan
Hosea: Hos
Obadiah: Obad
Micah: Mic
Nahum: Nah
Habakkuk: Hab
Zephaniah: Zeph
Haggai: Hag
Zechariah: Zech
Malachi: Mal

Bible Translations

In this book, the Bible translations are the author's.

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
Philemon: Phlm
Hebrews: Heb
James: Jas
1-2 Peter: 1-2 Pet
Revelation: Rev

Important Notice:

The author has included some important Greek New Testament and Hebrew Old Testament words in *italics* within parenthesis throughout this book for those of you who like in-depth understanding. If you do not have reference books for Greek and Hebrew, do a Google search for each word of interest.

Example Search: “meaning of the Greek word *dei*”

Extended Table of Contents

1: Understanding God’s Creation through Its Completion	1
God’s Desired Intimacy Should Bring Joy	2
You Can Trust What Jesus Said	4
Design in General	6
God’s Design of a Close Freewill Loving Righteous Family	7
The Creation Is Moving toward Its Final Form.	11
God Wants To Be Your Friend.	13
Getting Off the Wide-road That Leads to Destruction	13
2: Experiencing Good & Evil Demands a Decision	17
Evil versus Good.	18
Spiritual Warfare in General.	20
Spiritual Warfare & Satan’s Deceptions.	23
Stay Focused.	30
3: Understanding the Basics of Spiritual Warfare	33
After the Cross	35
Resist Satan.	36
Putting on the Whole Armor of God.	38
Heaven or Hell?	40
4: Waking Up Spiritually	49
Choices Have Consequences.	51
There Are No Passes into Heaven!	57
God Is Always at Work.	61
Born to Die Once	63
Born into Sin on the Wide-Road Leading to Destruction	64
Spiritual Awakening: Coming to Our Senses	71
Is the Cost of Following Jesus Too High?	74
Can Anyone Really Learn to Love God?	76
A Personal Testimony.	78
5: The Extreme Intimacy within God’s Eternal Holy Family. . .	83
God Persistently Encourages Everyone to Join Him.	85
God Demands a Response.	86
Being Born a Second Time, This Time Spiritually.	88
Being Made in the Image and Likeness of God	90
Brothers and Sisters	91
The Completed Family of God	92
Adoption: Our Legal Status as the Sons of God	92
Oneness: Extreme Intimacy with God and One Another.	94
Jesus Shares His Glory	96
Looking Closely at the Meaning of “One”	99
All Are Equal: The Father Has No Favorites	101
Early Church Understanding.	103
God’s Grace & Creation Are Hard To Believe.	105

Extended Table of Contents

6: Becoming a Follower of Jesus Is the Ultimate Victory of Life	109
A Commitment Is Necessary	110
Choose Life with God!	116
God Will Not Be Mocked	117
Turning Off the Wide-road That Leads to Destruction	119
Who Do You Say That I Am?	120
Jesus Provides a Renewed Sinless Life	124
Jesus Alone Provides Access to the Father	125
Denying Self	127
Carrying One's Cross & Experiencing Jesus' Joy	133
Following Jesus Is an Ongoing Relationship	142
What Do You Say?	143
Let's Talk Commitment	145
Being Liberated by God	148
The Father's Work & Your Development	149
7: Walking with Others in the Church	151
Sojourning with God	153
Being "in Christ"	155
Walking with Others in Our Local Churches	160
Jesus' Follower Are on a Mission	167
Being Committed	173
8: Helping Others Know God	175
The Church's Main Mission	176
The Great Commission Is a Work of Love	179
Witnessing for Jesus	182
Intentional Witnessing	183
Witnessing through Actions as Well as Words	185
Conversational Witnessing	186
Important Words and Concepts	188
Living Out God's Word and His Leading	191
Closing Thoughts	194
 Appendix: Jesus' Followers Proclaim that Jesus Is the Only Way! .	 197
 Chapter Notes	 199
 Bibliography	 207

Waking Up Spiritually

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 relaxing when all of a sudden the earth started shaking violently, and the buildings behind you disintegrate. Before you can get over the shock from the effect of the earthquake 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 Jesus would take you to meet your Heavenly Father, 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 someone starts listening to God, he or she starts realizing that there is more to the world around them than meets the eye.^(a) 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 of it. Within our physical world, God encourages all to engage in godly social interaction as we consider choosing life with Him for eternity versus eternal separation from Him and all who will be with Him.^(b)

a: (a) Compare Rom 13:11; 1 John 1:5-10; 2:15-29; John 3:19-21;

(b) 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.^(a) The physical world is affected by the spiritual and visa-versa. In the present, we affect the spiritual world through our actions in this physical world including 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 world that is 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.^(b) ***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 fruit 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 continue in our self-centered ways. It has been part of God's creative design to give everyone 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 a mutual caring interactive righteous way of life. 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 loving righteous gracious (holy) lives with Him.^(c)

Although God works righteously and graciously in our lives, many openly rebel against Him and His holy way of life.^(d) Even with open rebellion and sometimes hostility, God persistently works with all not wanting any to perish but all to come to a place in their life where they willingly turn to Him looking for help in living a loving righteous life.^(e) As God encourages everyone to know Him and His way of life more fully, many will not change,

a: (a) Eph 6:10-18; (b) 1 Peter 1:3-9; 2:9-10. Phil 3:17-4:1; (c) Rom 1:18-32; 2:11-16; and others; (d) Rom 5:8-10; (e) 2 Peter 3:9; cf. 1 Tim 2:4.

but others at various levels of rebellion including—some who have hit rock bottom—start willingly submitting to His authority because they start to realize how good He is and how trustworthy and able He is to complete the good Creation that He has started. They start changing from self-rule to seeking His leadership, which leads to a much better life now and forever.^(a)

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 out of a developing love, people will be confined in the future to an isolated place, a prison, called the Lake of Burning Fire, Gehenna, or more commonly “Hell” where there is no contact with God and His righteous followers forever. ***What one decides while physically living truly matters!***

Choices Have Consequences

God created everyone with free will requiring each person to make decisions that have eternal consequences and does not force Himself or His way of life on anyone. It is clear from Scripture that God would like everyone to learn to trust Him and choose to live with Him for eternity, but He knows that many will want to live life their own way and reject His leadership. He consistently encourages everyone to look beyond themselves and choose a life of unbiased love, peace, and joy with Him and others who want the same thing. As we noted above, at the end of the Creation, God will place those who will not receive Him and His leadership into their own isolated place commonly called Hell, and they will not be able to lower the quality of life for those who have chosen to listen to Him and become part of His eternal family.^(b)

With abundant free will being a critical element of God’s Creation, it is also clear from Scripture that God gives everyone multiples opportunities (spiritual awakenings) to learn to trust and obey Him. When the Creation is finalized, our Heavenly Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit want the members of Their close loving

a: (a) John 10:9-11; Rom 6:22; Rev 21:1-4; (b) Rev 20:11-15.

righteous family to interact maturely and freely within the Family under the overall leadership of the Father.^(a)

With such a high level of freedom within His family even on Earth, our Heavenly Father personally participates in guiding all who listen through a maturing process^(b) that eventually removes all sin from those who learn to return His love.^(c) As part of Their plan, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit agreed to take on personally a major portion of the pain that would be generated throughout the Creation in order to achieve ultimately a perfect freewill sinless family and world.²¹

Although the first individuals of God's Creation, Adam and Eve, went against Him and His commandment that instructed them not to partake of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil,^(d) we would all have done the same due to the lure of knowing and experiencing the unknown, if we thought that we might come out better in the long run through the experience. What Adam and Eve did not know is that this disobedient act would cause much pain and sorrow for them and all of their descendants, but it was part of God's overall plan that would eventually culminate in a freewill sinless eternal family. Although God knew in advance that all of His Creation would struggle because of Adam and Eve's decision to disobey Him,^(e) He placed such a high value on creating everyone with the ability to make important eternal decisions that He allowed such and provided a way to restore fully those who learned to listen to Him.^(f) All of this was done so that God's Creation would come to completion with an eternal close-knit sinless family that would live together in mutual love, peace, and great joy in a spiritual-physical state that matches Jesus' resurrected state.^(g)

With our great freedom to make choices comes great personal responsibility. It is important to remember that in order to become a mature loving-kind righteous sinless child of God, we must play by His rules following His righteous ways.^(h) There are

a: (a) 1 Cor 11:3; 15:28; cf. Eph 1:15-23; Heb 1: (b) John 15:2; (c) 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24; (d) Gen 2:16-17; 3:1-6; (e) Rom 8:18-23; (f) Heb 10:10-14; 1 Peter 3:18; (g) Phil 3:20-21; (h) Lev 19:2; Matt 25:46; 1 John 2:29; 3:10.

some today who think that God's ways are antiquated, and therefore, we can reject the portion of His life instructions (commandments) that we do not like.^(a) This is false! Keep in mind that all of God's ways are based on His eternal nature and are for everyone's good. We should continuously thank God for His patience in teaching us how to live holy lives giving those who listen the best life possible now and forever in all circumstances.

And as we discussed above, although God loves everyone beyond their present comprehension, He does not force anyone to become part of His eternal close-knit holy family, and He does not accept partial holiness. We must come to the place where we acknowledge past transgressions against God and others and seek forgiveness of such, which coupled with a growing love, trust, and obedience will result in spiritual birth into God's eternal close-knit holy family. Without God's atoning work on our behalf, no one is worthy to live in God's future sinless world, the New Heaven and New Earth. And even though it is good to belong to and participate in a local church, that in itself does not provide spiritual birth into God's holy family (salvation). God makes it clear in Scripture that we must receive Him into our lives as lord as well as savior.

As we read the Bible, which is for all generations, we learn that the way of life that leads to eternal life with God is sparsely traveled while the lifestyle that leads to eternal separation from Him is traveled by most because they choose to follow their own ways versus His way of life.^(b) Jesus teaches that unless we receive Him and His way of life through a growing love, trust, and obedience toward Him and our Heavenly Father, we will not see nor enter into Heaven.^(c) Through His parable about a wedding feast, Jesus warns everyone including religious leaders that God judges all according to their heart and actions. All are called at various times, but only those who come in proper attire are allowed to stay.^(d) He concluded this parable by warning those listening that "many are called (invited), but few chosen."²²

In Romans 8:28-30, Paul used the word "called" to indicate being born spiritually into God's holy family (chosen), which is

a: (a) Isa 40:8; Matt 5:17-20; Luke 16:17; (b) Matt 7:13-14; (c) John chapters 3, 14, and more; (d) Matt 22:1-14.

based on returning God's love, resulting in total righteousness and glorification as brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.²³ It is clear from what Jesus, Paul, and the rest of Scripture say in many places that God wants to help us change to be more like Him, which will produce the best life possible. Without a desire to listen to God, one will not be led into a transforming loving righteous (holy) life, which is often called "sanctification," that culminates in an eternal sinless life with God, other Saints, and the heavenly beings who stay loyal to Him and His way of life.

As individuals begin to ask God for help, some start to understand reality more fully through the teaching of the Holy Spirit. This helps them to see more fully the good and bad existing in the world, which in turn brings some to a place of wanting God's help to live according to His way of life,^(a) which includes following Jesus.^(b) Within the process of receiving God into their lives and learning to love and trust Him, the moment that they truly want Him to be lord as well as savior, God gives them spiritual birth into His eternal holy family.^(c)

Jesus taught that even some of those who called Him "lord" would not be in Heaven because they were not trying to do the will of His Father,^(d) and therefore, in reality, did not have a relationship with Him.^(e) He followed this teaching with a parable that taught the importance of having a strong foundation for life, which is God and His way of life. If we want a life with lasting love, joy, and inner peace, our life foundation needs to be God and His way of life.^(f) This is why Jesus warns everyone that if they are not willing to listen to Him they are not worthy to be His followers.^(g) Everyone who desires to be a member of God's eternal holy family must willingly follow His leadership starting at some point during one's physical life.^{24 (h)}

In reality, there are no "do overs." The writer of Hebrews said that it is appointed for each of us to *die once* and then a *judgment* will follow.⁽ⁱ⁾ ***There is no reincarnation!*** All people live

a: (a) John 4:34; 8:31b-32; (b) Luke 14:26-33; (c) John 1:11-13; Rev 3:20; Eph 1:13-14; (d) Matt 7:21; cf. 12:50; (e) Matt 7:23; (f) Matt 7:24-27; (g) Luke 14:27; cf. Matt 10:38; (h) Luke 14:26; (i) Heb 9:27; Rev 20:11-15.

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.^(a)

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 listen to God and allow Him to teach us, ***our own personal desires are like little children's; they cloud our reasoning*** blinding us to what is really going on (rationalization). In addition, Satan's deceptive work continually bombards us with all types of diversions and busyness.

Our self-centered desires along with Satan's deceptions and busyness combine to produce a mental and spiritual smokescreen keeping many from coming to know God well. 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 personal revelation, evangelists, preachers, teachers, family members, friends, associates, and even strangers. In our modern world, there are many ways to disburse information including pamphlets, magazines, books, phones, computers, ipads, android tablets, radio, TV, and more. Through these various forms of media, God asks us all to study and reflect on His Word, the Bible, in order to dispel the darkness around us, which helps us see reality more clearly, which in turn starts freeing us from the bondage of sin.^(b)

Billy Graham once wrote about a young lady who had written him a letter telling 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 such. 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

a: (a) 1 Peter 1:17; (b) John 8:31b-34.

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 Jesus.²⁵

One of my former seminary students, Dr. Greg Viehman, tells through his book, *The God Diagnosis*, about some of his spiritual awakening moments where eventually God got through to him by having him consider the potential outcome of life if it were not eternal. Would he, his family, and all of their memories just become like the sand of the sea with no remaining evidence of the lives they had lived? ²⁶ (a) After he had finished his residency and established his own medical practice, God started helping Greg understand the importance of repentance. On one occasion, His father-in-law invited a couple friends over to discuss the Good News with him and his wife, Ruth, and God gave Greg a supernatural peace about what he was hearing even if it was still hard for him to believe.^(b) A few years later after moving into a new neighborhood, God gave Greg an incentive to study the Bible so that he might prove that his Christian neighbors were not properly following God's loving righteous way of life: Greg's two sons experienced sadness due to the Christian neighborhood children not allowing them to join them in their play.^(c) Because of his past experiences, Greg also focused on three questions: (1) why couldn't Jesus give everyone eternal life if He was God; (2) if Jesus was God, why was He crucified; and (3) why didn't God create many ways to Heaven instead of only one?^(d)

After a fair amount of investigation into the Word of God including proving its historical accuracy, Greg came to the point of intellectually accepting the Apostle John's eyewitness account of Jesus and His atoning work.^(e) He was now ready for God to give him a final spiritual awakening, a personal review of his sins and

a: (a) pp. 11-15; (b) pp. 27-28; (c) pp. 34-35; (d) p. 43; (e) p. 108.

the opportunity to ask God for forgiveness of those sins.^(a) After Greg received Jesus into his life as lord and savior, he was born spiritually into God's family and felt like he had just awakened from a thirty-six year dream, a dream based on deception.^(b) Now that Greg was malleable as a new creation in Christ, God started molding him into His moral image. Soon after being born spiritually and realizing that he was changing, Greg started self-diagnosing and came to realize that through the work of the Holy Spirit, his personality and spiritual understanding were improving dramatically.^(c) Then, as Greg started sharing his new found faith, he discovered that many people, who were attending church on a regular basis, did not have a saving relationship with God.^(d) Realizing that there were many people who did not have a saving relationship with God, Greg wrote *The God Diagnosis* to help others open themselves up to a deeper relationship with God.

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 in 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. He will not win the overall war against God, but he is putting forth a major effort to turn as many of God's children against Him as possible. Due to abundant free will and high self esteem, he is doing well in keeping many on a life path that leads to eternal separation from God.

From the side of good, Scripture is clear that God has been longsuffering and working hard on humanity's behalf from the very beginning of the Creation. The Son of God, Jesus Christ, working with His Father even died both physically and spiritually^(e) in order to provide a way for good to triumph eternally. Through Jesus'

a: (a) pp. 116-119, 192; (b) pp. 121, 181; (c) pp. 166-68; (d) pp. 231-240; (e) Spiritual death is separation from His Heavenly Father.

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.^(a) Jesus provides a way to undo wrong and gives those who submit to God a righteousness like His own.^(b) 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 loving righteous lives and allowing God to lead them in their good 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 Jesus. 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 to our Heavenly Father in 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"?^(c) In reality, without a genuine commitment ***to follow*** Jesus Christ, there will be no spiritual birth into God's holy family nor corresponding new creation.

Today, there are many who believe that salvation is nothing more than asking God for a pass into Heaven to use when one dies. This lie causes some people to think that they have to wait until they get to Heaven before anything gets better. ***What a lie! Being molded and shaped by God (sanctification) and doing His assigned good works starts immediately for all who truly start following Jesus.***^(d)

a: (a) John 11:25-26; Eph 4:8-10; Heb 2:9-11; (b) Gal 3:13-14; 2 Cor 5:21; (c) 2 Cor 5:17; (d) Rom 6:22 and more.

The idea of asking God to be saved from our sins without making a commitment to follow Jesus as lord as well as savior is as worthless and harmful as the lie that Satan perpetuated in the Middle Ages that eventually caused a major reformation among many Christians. At that time, Satan had perpetuated a lie deceiving many into thinking that they could pay church officials to pray for salvation for themselves and their loved ones including the deceased, thereby giving everyone including the dead passes into Heaven. The ***new lie, which is being propagated by many, proclaims that everyone can ask for salvation recognizing Jesus as savior and thereby pick up a pass into Heaven without following Him as lord.*** This type of thinking is hindering many from considering a genuine commitment to follow Jesus.

It is only through a turning from self and following Jesus that one is saved from judgment as a sinner and spiritually born into God's holy family. ***Spiritual birth into God's eternal sinless family and corresponding renewal only come from God according to His will and His rules.***^(a) It is only through spiritual birth into God's family that sin is removed and one grows in godly righteousness. God's Word is clear: ***if individuals do not make a true commitment to follow Jesus, they are not able to be His disciples.***^(b) From the Bible, it is clear that being part of God's eternal holy family is only realized through trusting and obeying God out of a growing love for Him.^(c)

Satan's ongoing deceptions are worst than His first to Eve in the sense that her decision to disobey God did not condemn her and the rest of the world *eternally*, but many of Satan's ongoing deceptions are aimed at hurting people forever. Many of Satan's latest distortions have given many—including regular church attendees—a ***false sense of eternal security***, which has encouraged them to live like the rest of the world not actively following Jesus.

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.

a: (a) John 1:13; Luke 16:16-17; 2 Peter 3:9; (b) Luke 14:26-27; Matt 10:38; (c) John 3:16, 31; Rom 8:28-30; Rev 3:20; 21:7-8, 27.

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

- (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 than those not listening to God.

This ungodly activity is a terrible witness against God by many who are claiming to be Christians. Satan's contemporary deceptions are being perpetuated more and more giving many a false hope that most—if not all—are going to Heaven. The ungodly state of many local churches in the US and Europe *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 separation from God*. It is causing many to live out their lives with less joy and inner peace than God desires instead of being born of the Spirit and joining Him in His ongoing creative work, which produces a much more rewarding life now and forever.

Throughout time, various forms of busyness have been the worst barriers to understanding God and the spiritual world in which we live. It is critical that all of us slow down and receive ongoing instruction from God helping us understand our world better. King Solomon is a good case in point. As a king, he was very intelligent and stayed busy developing Israel, which included building up its cities and armies in order to protect Israel from the world around them;^(a) but, he failed to build up his personal and Israel's national relationship with God.^(b) 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 and listen to God.^(c)

a: (a) 1 Kings 4:20-28; 10:14-29; Eccl 2:1-10; (b) 1 Kings 11:1-13;
(c) Eccl 3:14; 12:13-14.

God Is Always at Work

Part of the Good News (Gospel) is that God is always at work helping as many as will listen understand the reality of the physical and spiritual realms of this world.^(a) *Everyone senses both* through what they see in the physical world and what the Holy Spirit helps them see spiritually,^(b) but keep in mind that it is only through their willingness to listen to the Creator that anyone is able to understand the reality of the world around them.^(c) Through God's help, everyone can potentially understand both the physical and spiritual realms.

It is sad that for most, God has to allow bad things to happen in order to get people's 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 He desires for us.^(d) Yet, God remains persistent working with all to awaken those who are willing to listen. The Holy Spirit is always actively working in everyone's heart and mind. 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 someone needing some spiritual awakening. He was a righteous man, who respected God^(e) but did not know Him as well as God wanted. He—like the rest of the Creation—fell short of doing God's will perfectly,^(f) so God allowed Satan to torment Job through many trials.^(g) When the time was right and Job had commended his own righteousness long enough,^(h) God introduced Himself in a very personal way and brought Job to the point of acknowledging his own sinfulness. Like Isaiah,⁽ⁱ⁾ when Job realized that he had sin in his life, he repented and committed to following God's ways more fully.^(j) In many

a: (a) John 5:17; 18:37; (b) Rom 1:18-22; 2:11-16; John 3:19-20;
 (c) John 3:21; 7:17; Acts 22:14a; 1 Cor 2:10, 16; (d) Rev 3:17-18;
 (e) Job 1:1, 8; (f) Rom 3:23; (g) Job 30:25-31; (h) Job 27:6; (i) Isa 6:1-7; (j) Job 38:1-40:4-42:6.

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 and our relationship with Him if we listen.^(a)

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 realms, we remain ignorant of the spiritual battles raging around us as Satan fights to destroy as many as possible. It is critically important for all people to submit whole-heartedly to the lordship of the Creator. Within His freewill creation, this voluntary submission gives God permission to train and empower us to do our pre-assigned parts moving the Creation forward.

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 with the result that awakening to a world without heroin, in which one experiences the good and bad of life again, is very uncomfortable.

Allowing God to awaken us to the reality of the existing spiritual realm 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 and physical world and the consequences of our ongoing decisions.

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

a: (a) Rom 5:3-5.

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 will listen into alignment with His holy nature producing eternal lives full of love, joy, inner peace, and excitement.

For all who allow God to awaken them from their personal self-centered worlds and start learning to trust and obey the Creator of the universe, they eventually come to realize that:

- (1) life is truly eternal for all people of all time with good or bad eternal consequences depending on choices made during each person's physical life;
- (2) those who obediently listen to God immediately become part of His eternal close-knit holy family and are given assignments during their physical lives (good works);^(a) and
- (3) those who obediently listen to God will eventually be fully transformed into Jesus' perfect moral nature and live forever with Them and the rest of Their close-knit holy family in Heaven experiencing continuous ongoing godly love, joy, and inner peace.

Born To Die Once

Just as it is determined (appointed) for men to die once, but after this judgment 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.^(b) 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 Sustainer.^(c)

a: (a) Jer 1:5; Gal 1:15-16; Eph 2:10; (b) Ps 39:4-5; (c) 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 holy 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. They are born spiritually into God's eternal holy family through the eternal indwelling of the Holy Spirit.^(a)

In Scripture, holy writers have used various terms such as God's "call, choice, or election" to designate 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 Judgment. He has perfect knowledge of everyone's inner motives and completed actions and exposes everything to the whole Creation.^(b)

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 and is living on a common wide life-path (road) leading eventually to eternal shame and pain with marred characters if they do not get off; and
- (3) everyone who learns to trust and obey God out of a growing love for Him will get off the wide-road and start

a: (a) John 3:1-8; Eph 1:13-14; 1 John 4:7; (b) Luke 8:17; Rev 20:11-15; cf. 2 Thess 2:10.

following Jesus as part of God's eternal close-knit holy family.

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.^(a) He describes the ways of the world as based on self-centeredness versus a God-centered love for all. God's Word is clear: a self-centered lifestyle leads to eternal pain, unrest, and shame, 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.^(b)

Let's take a look at a couple of uncaring sons within the Prodigal Son parable in Luke 15:11-32. As we look at Jesus' teaching about a loving father and *two* self-centered sons,^(c) we note three 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 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

a: (a) 1 John 2:15; and they will not last 2 Peter 3:7-13; Rev 22:1;

(b) Rom 6:22; (c) Luke 15:1-2, 11-32.

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 holy 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 family.^(a)

In this story, note that Jesus is talking primarily to the antagonistic Pharisees. The Pharisees are known to be morally good and can be compared to many of our contemporary church members. Many church members today have fairly 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.^(b)

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 life path have no place in God's eternal holy family. If 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 holy family unless he or she is allowing God to mold and shape his or her image into one similar to His.^(c)

Jesus makes us vividly aware that the ability to know good and to do good comes only from our Heavenly Father.^(d) 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 the things that we do. The only way to realize any true godly love, which produces

a: (a) Matt 5:43-48; 22:37-40; Luke 10:30-37; (b) 1 Cor 13:1-8a;

(c) Matt 5:3-12; Gal 5:22-23; (d) Matt 19:17; Luke 18:19; John 20:17.

inner peace and joy, is to live out our lives listening to God as we live according to His standards. God wants us to realize a good life and helps all who listen to Him learn to love as He loves.^(a)

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 not totally effective because of our fallen self-centered nature.^(b) 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 intimate family. Although we have been created to be part of God's eternal intimate family, sin has separated us from that very family.

During Moses' day, God taught those who would follow Him that they had to live loving-kind righteous (holy) lives: lives that were distinctly 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.^(c) They were to be a light to the world just as Christ's followers are today.^(d) From the very beginning, God has wanted as many as are willing from all nations to join Him as part of His holy eternal family. God with His righteous nature does not allow the co-existence of good and evil in His eternal presence knowing that

a: (a) John 13:34; 15:10-13; (b) Rom 8:3; (c) Ex 19:5-6; (d) 1 Peter 2:9.

such brings corruption and pain.^(a) That is why Scripture teaches us over and over again that God is holy and demands that we, His created children, strive for holiness.^(b)

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 (eternal separation from God) [Rom 6:23]!” He also stated emphatically, “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.^(c) 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 Israel’s sacrifices; it was only removed through the Messiah’s atoning death.^(d)

After his encounter with the risen Lord, Paul came to understand that he and many of countrymen had not really understood the necessity of God performing a costly miracle stemming from His righteousness to remove sin from their lives.^(e) In God’s economy, sin had to be removed like bad cancer cells, not covered over. 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 6:5; see also 6:3].”

a: (a) Rom 8:18-23; (b) Lev 19:1-2; 1 Peter 1:14-19; (c) Isa 52:13-53:12; Rom 9:30-10:4; (d) Heb 9:23-10:14; (e) Rom 1:16-17; Phil 3:4-11; 2 Cor 5:21.

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.^(a) We begin to understand that God is holy and will not allow **any** individuals who are sinning to enter into His eternal presence. ***Sin is not acceptable! It is like cancer.*** If unchecked it will destroy 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 holy family members. 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.***^(b)

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 any of God's people.

Justification: Becoming Holy Like God

As we reflect on our Heavenly Father's supreme righteous act of love on our behalf, the death of His Son, Jesus the Messiah, 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. ***Jesus' death was necessary*** to remove all sin from those who learned to trust Him.^(c) In God's economy, the penalty for

a: (a) Isa 59:1-8; Rom 6:23; (b) cf. Gal 3:24; (c) John 3:14-15; cf. Isa 53; 2 Cor 5:21.

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 closely with Him for eternity, ***justification, being made righteous without sin, was required; it was not optional.***^(a)

When someone becomes 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 and His way of life. 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 made plans prior to implementing the physical Creation to provide a way to remove our sins and renew our character according to His holy nature. It is God's righteous work—^(b) not our own—that ultimately has the ability to transform us into loving righteous (holy) beings suitable to live with Him and one another in His Heavenly Kingdom. Through the miracle of Jesus' death on the Cross, those who obediently follow Him have ***all sin removed and are given God's righteousness in exchange.***^(c)

Over the years, I have personally seen many continually reject God's invitation into His holy family, because they wanted to wait until they had their lives more in alignment with His or simply wanted more time to enjoy life on their own terms. No one is able to straighten out his or her life enough to approach God without God's help, and the Good News is that no one has to. God just wants us to come to the place of starting to return His love and desiring to live holy lives thus making a commitment to follow Him. 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.***^(d)

With this in mind, let us consider again 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)*** and He will help us to mature more and more into the likeness of Jesus with His great grace and righteousness;^(e)

a: (a) John 3:14-17; 2 Cor 5:21; (b) Rom 1:16-17; (c) 2 Cor 5:17; 1 Peter 2:24; (d) Acts 1:8; Rom 8:14; Gal 5:22-23; (e) cf. James 1:12.

(2) we are **justified**: our sins are removed through a great miraculous work of God, who removes our sins making them Jesus' sins; in exchange for our sins, He has given us His righteousness;^(a) and

(3) we are **glorified**, given full-sonship and eventual perfect moral character matching Jesus' sonship and character.^(b)

As we learn to start trusting and obeying Jesus out of a growing love, we begin to stand upon our Father's promises. As we start walking 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.***^(c) As the Father continually softens our hearts and strengthens our resolve to follow Jesus more fully, we become more and more compassionate toward others. There is great comfort in knowing that in the not-to-distant future, we will have our sins totally removed and will be conformed perfectly into Christ's moral image^(d) as we enter God's immediate presence where there will be no more pain nor sorrow.^(e)

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 has 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.^(f) In Jesus' day—as in every period of history—many people stayed busy building their careers and

a: (a) cf. Rom 3:21-28; Gal 3:13; 2 Cor 5:17-21; (b) cf. John 1:14; 17:23, 26; Rom 8:14-17; 1 John 3:1-2; (c) Phil 1:6; (d) Rom 8:29; 1 John 3:1-2; (e) Rev 21:1-7; (f) Isa 60:1-3.

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 one from listening to God. Through the Holy Spirit's work and Jesus' leadership, the Father uses His faithful people of every generation to help awaken those who are spiritually slumbering through personal interaction. Presently, this includes pamphlets, magazines, books, radio, TV, E-mail, ipads, android tablets, and the list goes 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 and following Him.

Initially, most people do not listen to what God is saying. They only ask God for help in fulfilling their own self-centered desires. This was true thousands of years ago through the many gods and perverted philosophies that Satan has used to deceive people. Satan gave them deceptive gods to help them with every aspect of their lives. Even today many people, who proclaim that there is only one true God, consider Him more like a genie who might help them with various difficulties in life, but they do not talk to God about building their personal relationships with Him. But, the Good News includes the fact that God is at work with all, and it is God who over time is able to bring some to a place where they start to care about Him, His ways, and their neighbors.^(a)

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 younger self-centered son portrayed in Luke 15:14-20. Many people do not turn to God unless there is a special need, and then our Heavenly Father takes these opportunities to reveal Himself and teach the importance of caring about others. While He has their attention during difficult times, He works in their lives showing them a genuine need for His help beyond their present circumstances. He shows them the advantage of becoming part of an eternal caring family, the need for removal of sin, and how through His great love, He has

a: (a) Matt 22:37-40.

provided a way through Jesus Christ for everyone to become perfect and join His caring righteous family.^(a)

For those who start to listen beyond their immediate concerns, God starts guiding them off the wide-road leading to separation from Him and onto their individualized tailored roads with Him. These narrow roads have been assigned not only to lead Jesus' followers into eternal life but also to guide them into the good works that the Father has for those who listen. God consistently stays at their side asking them to allow Him to be more fully involved in their lives.^(b)

In addition to what God teaches everyone about Himself through His Creation as the Holy Spirit illuminates truth,^(c) He asks all who are willing—whether committed to Him yet or not—to learn more about Him through the reading of His Word.^(d) God has inspired each of the writers of His Word, the Bible, and it profits all who listen.^(e) 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.^(f)

If you have a desire to know more about God or have already 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 freer and freer 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.^(g)

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 lifestyle. Many people—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.

a: (a) John 17:23; 20:17; Eph 4:1-6; Rev 21:3; (b) Rev 3:20; (c) Rom 1:18-32; 2:11-16; (d) Deut 4:1; 30:15-16; Ps 103:17-18; 119:5-12; (e) 2 Tim 3:16-17; (f) 1 John 2:27; John 7:17; (g) John 8:31b-36; cf. Rom 12:1-2.

Here is the crux of the matter: starting with Adam and Eve's sin, everyone starts out with some self-centered desires for themselves and their families without the proper amount of concern for their neighbors. Everyone starts out with some level of blindness not fully seeing the devastating consequences of their bad actions. To help overcome this blindness, **God gives everyone moments of awakening with its corresponding lucidity** asking each person to decide whether he or she will start obeying His Word and His leading, which leads to a better life now and forever.

During those lucid moments, everyone has to go through an inner struggle deciding whether or not they are willing to give up some of their 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 old familiar less satisfying life and become self-absorbed again forgetting the better life that God had shown them.^(a)

But, Jesus' true followers are new creations and are being transformed,^(b) and they are learning to love others as God loves all.^(c) 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 holy children.^(d) When they die physically, Jesus will meet them as their spirit leaves their bodies and escort them into the presence of their eternal Father.^(e)

Is the Cost of Following Jesus Too High?

It is difficult for many people, who are contemplating following Jesus, to start this journey, because they know that one must put aside some personal desires (dying to self) in order to start building a close relationship with God. God is asking

a: (a) James 1:23-24; Rev 3:15-20; (b) 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 5:22-23;
 (c) 1 John 3:14; 4:16-19; (d) John 14:1-3; 17:24; 20:17; Rom 8:17;
 (e) John 14:3; 1 John 3:1-2; Rev 21:3.

everyone to set aside some personal pleasure and ambition and accept His individualized path for each. For those who start following Jesus, their love for God and what He thinks will start growing along with their love for others. This starts developing within them a growing inner peace and joy.

What I have found over time is that many have difficulty in giving up present personal desires for a life of ongoing service in God's holy family even if that service leads to a more fulfilling life now and an eternally close life with God and others in the future.^(a) For many, it just seems really hard to accept such an offer from God because of *the possible lack of immediate gain*. Even when they know that Heaven is secured by God due to His great ability and power over everything, many still want things their own way. They are not willing to allow God to reshape their character to become more and more like His nor wait for the finalized New Heaven and New Earth without its sin, tears, and sorrow. In reality, many consider a present life of following Jesus *too high a cost* to give up present short-lived worldly pleasures and ambitions even if they could obtain more joy and 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 taking seriously.^(b) 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 His lead in a loving righteous (holy) lifestyle that will include some sacrifice. He warns all that if they are not willing to do such, they will not become part of His eternal holy family that prioritizes love for all over everything.

Personal investment of time, energy, and resources into the lives of others is part of God's plan for all. In order to successfully implementing God's plan, one must listen to Him and learn to love Him and others.^(c) Returning God's love is contingent on getting to know and trust Him.^(d) Trust in God is developed through obediently following Jesus and actively stepping out in a growing trust to accomplish His will for our lives.

a: (a) Rom 6:22; (b) Luke 14:26-35; (c) 1 Cor 13:4-7; (d) John 3:14-17; Eph 1:13-14; cf. Heb 5:13-14; 2 Peter 1:1-11.

God is pleased with any and all good that we do, but He is also clear that any sin in our lives that is not removed will prevent us from spending eternity with Him,^(a) and He reminds us that all have sinned.^(b) At first glance, this sounds pretty bleak, but we should keep in mind that God has created all of us to be with Him forever.^(c) So, 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 uncaring distant genie—but because of who He is.*** God truly loves and cares deeply about everyone encouraging our godly development. God works on our behalf doing what is best for each.^(d)

Can Anyone Really Learn to Love God?

As one reads the Bible and considers God’s creation in general, many come to realize that God is not limited by time but instead knew exactly what He was doing and what was going to happen throughout the entire Creation before He implemented it physically. And because He was not bound by time, is able to complete His Creation successfully, and loves everyone tremendously, He knew in advance how He would interact with each person (predestination) based on His foreknowledge of what each of us would do in response to His redeeming work for all of us.^(e) In addition to the physical creation of the universe (Gen 1-2), we find in Scripture that all people live forever and that the completion of the Creation includes people either being separated from Him forever or given resurrected bodies to live with Him on a perfectly sinless New Earth forever.^(f) God is incredibly able to do things that are well beyond our limitations. Then, considering that ***God loves everyone and does not want any to perish*** but all to turn to Him,^(g) we have to ask, ***“If God loves everyone and is able to give spiritual birth to everyone, why doesn’t He?”***

a: (a) Rom 6:23; (b) Rom 3:23; (c) 2 Peter 3:9; cf. John 3:16- “the world”—all people; (d) John 15:2; 1 John 4:10-16; (e) 1 Peter 1:1-2; Eph 1:3-8; 2 Peter 3:9; (f) Rev 20:11-21:8; cf. Dan 12:2; (g) 2 Peter 3:9; cf. John 3:16; 1 Tim 2:3-4.

The answer to that question is clearly stated in multiple places within Scripture. Due to God's inspiration of all of His Word,^(a) and therefore it is without contradictions, we know that everyone must come to a place where he or she willingly receives Him and His way of life as part of their life.^(b) When Jesus was teaching God's Word to Nicodemus about being born again,^(c) He explained that the people who were trusting God would have eternal life,^(d) and He taught that their obedience to God would come out of love for God^(e) and a corresponding willingness to do His Father's will.^(f)

After Jesus' resurrection, He personally taught Paul, who then taught many that spiritual rebirth came after they heard the Good News proclaimed and responded positively by starting to trust God.^(g) Paul also taught that everyone was responsible for their actions because God gives everyone clear evidence through His Creation to know Him and His righteous way of life.^(h) Paul went on to say that even if someone did not have God's Written Word, God would hold that person accountable for their actions because the Holy Spirit works in all people to help them understand God's desired righteousness for their lives.⁽ⁱ⁾

Much earlier, when Israel was getting ready to go in and inhabit the land promised to them through God's promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, He told them through Moses that if they wanted an abundant physical life (which leads to an eternal life with God), they needed to learn to love Him, obey His commandments (instructions for life), and trust Him.^(j) **Keep in mind that Jesus was teaching from the Old Testament, which had not yet been expanded with the clarifying teachings of the New Testament.** Jesus let everyone know that the Old Testament's content would not be changed at any time throughout the Creation.^(k) The Old Testament is everyone's foundation and starting point from which to understand God, and in it, everyone is responsible for their actions starting with Adam and Eve and their two first-born sons, Cain and Able (Gen 4:7), who were born in sin.

a: (a) 2 Tim 3:16-17; (b) John 1:10-13; Rev 3:20-21; cf. Deut 30:15-20; (c) John 3:1-21; (d) John 3:14-17; cf. 3:36; (e) John 14:15, 21, 23; (f) Matt 12:50; (g) Eph 1:13-14; (h) Rom 1:18-20; (i) Rom 2:11-16; (j) Deut 30:19-20; (k) Matt 5:17-20; cf. Luke 16:16-17.

Looking at the overall picture of God's Creation and Word, we know that the Father sent Jesus into His Creation to help us understand Him and His Word through Jesus' loving gracious actions and teachings (John 18:37), which are proclaimed throughout the New Testament. When we consider all of the Old and New Testament writings, it is clear that God provides sin removal through Jesus, the promised Messiah, for all who learn to trust and obey Him out of a growing love in Him.^(a) **With the help of the Holy Spirit, all of these biblical truths plus much more help us understand that God wants us to choose to lovingly, willingly, trustingly, and obediently receive Him into our lives.**

This biblical truth is challenged by some who think that everyone within God's creation is so caught up in sin that they cannot choose to receive God into their lives, and therefore, God through some form of a lottery gives some spiritual rebirth into His eternal family while abandoning the rest of His Creation to live in Hell separated from Him forever. **This thought does *not* line up with the general idea that is expressed clearly throughout God's Word that each person must make a choice between doing things their own way or receive God and His way of life as their way of life, which is known as repentance.**

A Personal Testimony

What We Were Taught Growing Up

There is as good chance that you—like most of us—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.

a: (a) Deut 30:15-20; Isa 53; John 3:14-17; Rom 6:6; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24; et al.

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 normally called Hell. I came to realize that being sentenced eternally to Hell was not solely God's judgment for bad behavior but also an alternative for those who did not want to follow His lordship nor His holy way of life, which is based on a pure impartial love for all. 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 who would live during the Creation to be with Him in His completed perfection, if they would become willing to return His love. As I began to understand God's way of life more fully and how good it is to follow Jesus, I started to want to please Him more, and I learned to start letting go of my childhood dreams and receive His much more fulfilling plans for my eternal life.

God Gives Everyone a Chance to Know Him

I do not think that our initial childhood dreams and careers make much difference ultimately in deciding whether or not God is

worthy to follow. Some of us may start off without any real aspirations but simply desire to take care of ourselves and our families, while others may have high expectations of rewarding careers in an assortment of fields. Others may simply not care to engage in anything and may just start off drifting without any real direction. But, in all cases whether or not we have followed the One True God from childhood, I believe there comes a time when each of us realizes that there is a living interactive power higher than ourselves and that something is missing in our lives, if we are not interacting positively with that higher power. This is because at various times, God interacts with everyone from every cultural and religious background from conception to physical death encouraging every heart and mind to follow Him and His way of life.^(a)

For me after military service, undergraduate college, and within five to six years of successfully growing a company, I started to realize that success and a reasonable amount of money were 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 and 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 God and others was the only thing of eternal value.

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 now and forever. As I personally grew in my relationship with God, I realized that He was inviting me to limit my business activity and minister more to others. He was asking me to let go of my childhood dreams and accept the good works that He had planned out specifically for me before the physical Creation started. I just needed to follow His lead. Although I had recommitted my life to following Jesus more closely at twenty-

a: (a) Rom 2:11-16; cf. Rom 1:18-32.

eight, it was not until I reached thirty-seven 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—many times in the face of adversity even from those around us.

God Encourages Us to Know Him Well & Walk with Him

Over the next decade, God helped me to know Him and His Word more fully through continual godly interaction with Him, others, and graduate level Bible study. God worked in my life in such a way as to encourage my wife and I to move further away from what we had been taught earlier in life and to refocus keeping an eye on what He might have us do to help others in addition to helping family and friends.

The Bible teaches that there is a wide common road (life pathway) that all start off on and many remain on throughout their entire lives. This common pathway leads to an eternal life of shame, unrest, and suffering without God,^(a) but there is a second life pathway that is less frequently traveled. It is for those who choose to listen to God. This less traveled life path (road) can be exciting and leads to great godly joy and inner peace. Each of our lives are distinct, and 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 one another. As we listen to God, He enlightens us helping us to understand reality better.^(b) As we follow God's lead and introduce Him to others through our actions as well as our words, we are encouraged, empowered, and experience excitement, joy, and inner peace.

Prayerfully, reading this book and studying the biblical principles within will help bring more overall clarity to your life prior to meeting God face-to-face. As you read further, let's consider more fully the idea that God created everyone to be part of

a: (a) Dan 12:2; cf. Matt 25:31-46; (b) John 7:17; 8:32-33, 47; 18:37.

His volunteer intimate loving righteous (holy) eternal family, and let's consider our actions from that eternal perspective. In addition, let's remember that 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 them and wants the best for everyone. Therefore, let's keep in mind that **now** is the time for the followers of Jesus of this generation to engage our culture and dispel the spiritual darkness around us. **Now** is the time for the Church to demonstrate clearly God's love for **all** through our actions as well as our words. Through our spiritual rebirth and faithfully following Jesus, may we experience much excitement, joy, and inner peace as we make God more fully known to the world around us.

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