

KEYS TO THE KINGDOM

Foundations for Growth and Change

Michael Floyd

JPT Books

Keys to the Kingdom: Foundations for Growth and Change
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“Change My Heart, Oh God,” words by Eddie Espinosa

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The Prayer for This Book

*Change my heart O God
Make it ever true
Change my heart O God
May I be like You
You are the potter,
I am the clay.
Mold me and make me,
This is what I pray*

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. . . . You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.

– Jesus (Matt. 16:19; 22:37-40)

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Preface

Some twenty years ago, I set out to write a discipleship course for new believers and those believers who were not grounded in their faith. It was a 16-week course, entitled “So I’m a Christian.” It was written on a Brother Word Processor, and my only copy was in a green pocket folder. My mother was kind enough to proofread it for me.

In the craziness of life that followed, the folder was lost. I had been quite proud of what I thought was a great accomplishment. And it was – for such a young Christian (less than ten years in the faith at that point). My heart has continued, however, to be for discipleship and to see others grow in faith, as I myself have grown in faith through the various stages of my life.

I have, over the years, tried to reconstruct it – with not much success. It simply was not the Lord’s timing or way. At some point, I realized that was simply not to be, and I was able to leave it in the Lord’s hands. Thus, when setting out to write *Keys to the Kingdom*, I had no thought of it being a replacement for that never-forgotten course.

As I learned and wrote, however, it suddenly dawned on me that it was indeed the updated version of that course. As with many things, we must first bury that dream first, so that the Lord can purge it of any

self-centered motivations. If it is a God-given dream, He will raise it up in His time.

As with all my writings, they are written in His service. I am grateful to those who have encouraged me along the way (and in some cases gently pushed me). I am grateful to those who have challenged me to consider other viewpoints.

This book was written in the midst of the learning process, a difficult time in my life. It represents my own understanding of the journey toward growth in Christ as I walk it myself. I claim no final authority, though I believe I can rightly claim solid biblical support.

In the end, any real change must be ascribed to the Lord's hand — my own change included. May His Spirit guide each of us on the road to knowing, loving, and serving Christ and others.

Michael Floyd
September 2019

Introduction

Jesus told Peter, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:19). Whatever else the phrase “keys to the kingdom” might imply, it certainly includes entry into the Kingdom. When we take this idea of entering the Kingdom along with Jesus' words about following Him and being His disciple (Luke 14:25-33), we begin to see that Peter was given the keys to a life of following Christ. For that is what life in the Kingdom is.

Many Christians often reach a point where they ask, “Is this all there is? I thought Jesus promised us abundant life! Am I missing something?” It's my firm conviction after 25+ years of walking with Christ that many who ask that question *are* missing something. Not salvation. They are indeed saved. But they are missing the “keys to the kingdom.” They heard the basics of the gospel – accept Christ, go to heaven. They now have a heart that is inclined to know God and follow Christ. Yet they have little conception of what that means or how to do that. When they ask, often they are met with, “Work out *your own* salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12, emphasis added). The art of true discipleship is becoming a lost art.

Over the last 25 years I've observed that there are three keys — three fundamentals concepts or understandings that facilitate growth in Christ. Those who intentionally set out to learn and use these keys are the ones most likely to continue to grow in Christ and to attain

the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes" (Eph. 4:13-14).

What are these three keys?

Key #1: A biblical understanding of who God is. God, being God, is the ground for everything. Everything is upheld by Him. One of the biggest stumbling blocks encountered by Christian is a wrong view of God. Thus, the first key to really maturing in Christ is to know God. Not just know *about* Him but *know* Him. Know His character and His heart. When we begin to know those things, we begin to know His ways (Ps. 25:4).

Key #2: A biblical understanding of the New Covenant. What actually happened to me when I trusted Christ for my salvation? Did *anything* happen to me? Is it all just up to me? The second key to spiritual maturity is a firm understanding of transformational theology, otherwise known as the New Covenant, which Jeremiah and Ezekiel predicted, and Jesus initiated. This "new arrangement" that God instituted changed everything, including our very nature and identity.

Key #3: A biblical understanding of our identity. Not only does a believer need to have a firm understanding of the New Covenant, but he also needs to know who *he* is (and was). There's a popular saying in Christian circles today, "I'm a sinner saved by grace." Is that accurate? Who was I before Christ saved me, and who am I now? The third key to maturing in Christ is an understanding of our identity – both before and after we are saved. Since our behavior is directly tied to our belief system and our image of who we are, this is a vitally important concept.

The rest of this book is dedicated to exploring and fleshing out these three keys, and what it means to grow and change in a biblical context. Parts 1, 2, and 3 of the book will deal with each of these three keys, while Part 4 will focus on developing a model of biblical change.

It is my hope that as you join me on this journey you will encounter the Gospel in a fresh new way. As we allow the Holy Spirit to guide us, my prayer is that we will be drawn closer to the very heart of the Father, so that any fear, guilt, or condemnation would disappear in His Light.

PART ONE

The Knowledge of the Holy One

Chapter 1: God's Self-Introduction

Chapter 2: The Nature of God

Chapter 3: The Character of God

Chapter 4: Using the Key: Knowing God

Chapter 1

God's Self-Introduction

“Who is the Lord?” This was a question asked by Pharaoh to Moses (Exodus 5:2). Despite the derisive tone that Pharaoh had, it is still an important question, one that all must eventually ask and answer.¹ The problem is that so many develop answers that are at best incomplete and at worst the very opposite of who God is. Human nature at the core is hostile to God, seeking to find freedom and life outside of Him. To accomplish this, we develop warped views of who God is to justify our hostility toward Him.

What makes this question so important? If God holds my very life in His hands, as well as my eternal destiny, it would be a good thing if I know who this God is and what He is like. If He were mean and cruel, I'd be constantly worried about provoking Him. I'd need to be walking on eggshells all the time. If, however, He is good, kind, and loving, then perhaps I can relax a little as I seek to obey Him. How I relate and interact with God is directly related to how I view His character. Therefore, if my conception of God is wrong, then I will be acting in a manner that I don't need to be.

God Wants Us to Know

¹ The word rendered “Lord” is *Yahweh*, “I Am; the Self-Existent One” So, when Pharaoh asked the question, The tone was really “Who is this Yahweh? I am Pharaoh, the God-King.”.

Contrary to some views, the Lord desires that we know His character, and in fact *we can know His character*. He promised that we would know Him: “You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart” (Jer. 29:13). And again, He says, “And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest” (Jer. 31:34). The Lord *wants* His people to know Him.

But how do we get to know God’s character? There are three primary ways that He has revealed Himself to us: Nature, the revelation of the Bible, and through Jesus Christ.

The Revelation of Nature

Paul tells us in Romans, “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse” (Rom. 1:19-20). Man can know God (at least to the extent that He exists and that He is righteous).² Theologians typically call this sort of knowledge *general revelation*. God gave all men light and some knowledge of His existence and attributes. It’s not a personal or relational knowledge, but more like knowing “about” someone.

The Revelation of the Bible

Beyond general revelation, we can know God

² See Romans 1:32, where Paul mentions that “they know God’s righteous decree.”

through the Bible, His written word. The Bible was given to us for that very purpose. We can learn a lot about His nature and character just by studying the Bible. Yet, there is a danger in that. We can have all the had knowledge about God from the Bible, and yet still not know Him in a personal/relational way. To many, the Bible is little more than words on a page.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

The Bible tells us that Jesus came to make the Father known to the world (John 1:18). Jesus was even more explicit when He told Philip, “Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). That statement refers to much more than just physical attributes. Jesus was saying He is the physical manifestation of the Father, and one can know the nature and character of the Father by knowing Jesus. He is the final and ultimate revelation of the Father to the world.³

So, we can know God. We can know His nature and character, and we can know Him personally. Of course, since He is God, we can’t know or understand *everything* about Him. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:9). But, that doesn’t mean that we can’t know *anything*.

What Do We Know About God?

³ It is true that the Holy Spirit also reveals the Father, but His function (at least in the life of a believer) is to draw a person back to Christ, by bringing to remembrance the words of Christ, convicting of sin, and giving peace, comfort and guidance.

Scripture tells us what God is like. Whole books have been written on the subjects, and it's not the aim of this book to add to that collection. Instead, we will examine some of His attributes, so that we can get a broad picture of who God is. We'll start, then, with God's own introduction of Himself:

The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty (Exodus 34:6-7).

This passage is God's first introduction of Himself.⁴ Often when describing themselves or others, a person will put the most important traits first. What, then, does God think is important for humanity to know about Him?

- God tells us His name: "The Lord, the Lord." Literally, this translates to *Yahweh, Yahweh*. The name of the biblical God is *Yahweh*, which can be understood as "the One who is; the self-existent One."
- *Yahweh* is a merciful and gracious God. He is "full of mercy and grace," and dispenses both freely to those who are humble.
- He is slow to anger. He is not easily provoked by people.
- He is "abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." Put another way, His love endures

⁴ There are other times when God spoke to men with a revelation of Himself. For example, Gen. 17:1 tells us, "When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.' However, the passage in Exodus is the first time the Lord describes His character, telling humanity what He considers important about Himself.

forever, and there is nothing that will change that. He keeps His word.

- Because of His love, mercy, and compassion, He forgives sin and iniquity.
- Because of His holiness and justice, He does not “clear the guilty.” At first, this seems to contradict the previous statement about forgiving sin. However, it does not, as w will discuss later.

There are, of course, many more attributes of God. These, however, are central to who He is and our understanding of Him. We will take the next several chapters to explore them further.

Chapter 2

The Nature of God

Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:13-14).

God revealed Himself in many ways to the Old Testament patriarchs. The names we learn show different parts of His character. When He declared His name to Moses, however, He gave the most fundamental description of who He is. God told Moses, "Say to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" The phrase *I AM* is variously translated as *Yahweh* or *Jehovah*.⁵

As God described, the name means "I am that I am," or "I will be what I will be." The central idea is that God is *the Self-Existent One*. He alone is uncreated in the whole universe. When we ask, "Who created this or that?" we can give an answer. Yet, if we ask, "Who created God?" there is no answer to that question. God has always existed and will always exist. He is beyond both space and time. Thus, as has often been said, He lives in the "eternal now." He sees all--past, present,

⁵ The Jews never wrote out the full name of God for fear of using His name in vain. Over time, the vowels that belonged were lost. It is generally written *YHWH*. The KJV translates it as *Jehovah*, most modern scholars prefer *Yahweh*.

and future.

Not only does *Yahweh* see all, but He is also *sovereign* over all. Nothing happens apart from His counsel and will. Humanity cannot thwart the purposes of God, else He would cease to be God. This often causes problems for us humans, since we have limited understanding. We ask how a good God would or could allow the things we see every day in the world. Then we develop theories seeking to explain these apparent discrepancies and defend God's character. Yet, no man-made theory will be adequate to explain the things of God. As difficult as it is at times, we must accept that biblical truth that nothing happens outside of His will and purpose, and that He uses all to accomplish His purposes.

Along with being self-existent (uncreated), *Yahweh* is also *self-sufficient*. He needs nothing. There is nothing that a created being can offer to Him that He needs. While He desires the fellowship of humanity and the worship of all creation, He is not in need of those things. The implications of that statement should give us pause. The God of the universe, the Creator of all that is, *wants to fellowship and have a relationship with us!* Not only that but He wants that relationship even though His creation is stained by sin! How we can enter that relationship is a subject that we will discuss later.

Holy is the Lord

One of the most commonly mentioned attributes of God in Scripture is that of *holiness*. What does it mean that God is holy? Some people think it means that He has a specific temperament, such as a stern Father,

looking down to catch someone doing wrong. Holiness, however, has more to do with God's fundamental nature rather than personality or a specific character trait. When applied to God, holiness includes all of these ideas:

- *Moral perfection.* God is free from all sin, uncleanness, and moral impurities.
- *Completeness.* God is complete in every possible way.
- *Perfection.* Each of God's attributes is perfect and complete. (He is perfectly just, perfectly merciful, etc.).

That last point needs a little explaining. Just as pure white light contains all the colors of the rainbow, God's holiness includes all His other attributes. Holiness, then, is an essential characteristic of God. Without it, He would cease to be God – at least the God of the Bible.

This is in stark contrast to the gods we see in man-made religions. The gods of the Greeks and Romans, for example, are almost human in their nature. Many of them are depicted as lustful, petty, and even cruel. This is the end result when man creates a god, for humans will always make a god in their image, with the same flaws. Fallen humanity can neither imagine nor create a god such as Yahweh, the God of Scripture.

Self-existence and holiness are the most basic attributes of God. Without these characteristics, the God we know as Yahweh would not be God. He would only be a mirror-image of the flawed humans who created Him.

One and Three: The God of Community

If you've spent any serious time reading the Bible, you might have noticed one peculiar thing. The God that the Bible talks about is presented in both singular and plural forms. As the verse above says, God (singular) said, "Let us [plural]." Scripture affirms that there is one God. "I [singular] am the Lord, and there is no other, besides me there is no God" (Isa. 45:5). Yet in numerous places, God is talked about as three different persons: Father, Son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit. Even Jesus, in His closing words to the disciples, referred to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19).⁶

This concept is commonly known as *the Trinity*. We won't stop to discuss it here, however. Scripture both assumes and affirms the idea. What we are going to focus on is "the three." The God of Scripture lives in what might be called "the Eternal Community."

There has been a lot written of late on the idea of this Community. People often ask the question, "What must it have been like in eternity past, when nothing was created, and there was only God, in the Eternal Community?" Some say *boring*, some say *fun*, and still others propose other ideas along those lines. The point, though, is that God is described in three Persons, and they exist in community. Now, let's consider this verse for a moment, because there's an important implication. *Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our*

⁶ It's not the purpose of this book to set out a case for the Trinity. Scripture assumes both of those. While honest Christians disagree about the exact nature of the Trinity, the historic position of the church is that "There is one God, expressed in three coequal Eternal Persons."

likeness" (Gen. 1:26).

When God created humans in His image, whatever else that means, it certainly includes the idea of community. He created humankind with the capacity and desire to connect with others. Dr. Larry Crabb goes so far as to say that the ability to connect is at the core, the very center, of our being.⁷

The three members of the Eternal Community are and have always been connected with each other. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share all things. There are no walls between them. All that the Father has He gives to the Son, and all that the Father and Son have, they share with the Holy Spirit.⁸

Since humanity was created in God's image, and that image necessarily contains the idea of connection to a community, then mankind was created to be connected. One of God's first words about man was that "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18). Why was it not good? It wasn't good because He created Adam for community. Adam needed someone to relate to, someone 'fit for' (or comparable to) him.⁹

Self-Existence. Holiness. Eternal Community. These are the most basic attributes of the God of the

⁷ Larry Crabb, *Connecting: Healing Ourselves and Our Relationships* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), Kindle Edition, loc. 843. He defines connection as "[the] capacity to give and receive in relationship, a capacity or possibility that defines what it means to be alive as a human being."

⁸ Jesus (the Son) always maintained that He lived in a state of dependence on the Father (John 5:19), and the Holy Spirit's role is to turn people to Christ and bring to remembrance the teachings of Christ (John 14:26).

⁹ Though the account of God's creation of Eve is often used to illustrate marriage, it is as much about community and connection. God created Eve first to come alongside Adam in community and *secondly* as his wife to fulfill the mandate to have dominion over the whole earth.

Bible. In the next chapter, we will look closer at God's personality and character. How does the Bible describe the God we worship? Read on.

Chapter 3

The Character of God

In the previous chapter, we briefly looked at some of the fundamental characteristics of God – how the Bible describes Him (to be more specific, how *God* describes Himself). In this chapter, we will take a closer look at those and other traits, so that we have a better idea of the One to whom we must all give account.

We've already seen that the God of the Bible (*Yahweh*) is complete and perfect within Himself (see the previous chapter for a discussion of this). What we are concerned with in this chapter is how He relates to His creation. Many people have notions of God and how He relates to us. Some think He is like a permissive parent sitting on the throne of heaven, simply shaking His head and saying, "Boys will be boys." Others think He is more like a strict judge, with a lightning bolt in His hand, just waiting for us to mess up. Still others think He doesn't concern Himself at all with human affairs. He set the universe in motion, then let it go. And of course, there are those that deny that He exists in the first place.

In truth, none of those are truly accurate. The Bible presupposes the existence of God. Nowhere does it seek to prove that He exists. The God of the Bible is actively engaged in human affairs. The question, then, is

how He relates to us. To answer that, we are first going to return to a passage we looked at earlier

The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty (Exodus 34:6-7).

From this passage we saw some of the Lord's most recognized characteristics: mercy, grace, justice, and faithfulness, for example. Now we are going to take a closer look at them and attempt a picture of how Scripture portrays God. Granted, it will of necessity be an incomplete picture, because He is far above our understanding. But He does desire that we know Him.

From the passage, it might seem that the Lord has two conflicting sides to Him: the "gentle" side of mercy and grace, and the "strict" side of justice and holiness. However, the Lord never has any internal conflicts. We as humans often do, because we are flawed and corrupted by sin. We often see mercy and grace given *at the expense of* justice and holiness. We tend to choose between the two. The Lord, however, is by nature both merciful *and* just at the same time. This being the case, He is able to dispense mercy without compromising His justice, because of His plan, revealed in the Gospel.

Put another way, because God is merciful, He desires to show His mercy. However, He is also just and holy. Because He is holy, He cannot overlook sin – His justice must be satisfied. So, in order that we, His sin-stained creations, may have fellowship with Him, God implemented a plan whereby the demands of the law would be satisfied. Not by us, though. By another. That

is the heart of the Gospel. We are now going to see how this plays out in how God is described as a father

God as Father

One of the many great pictures of God in Scripture is that of God as a father to His people. Jesus and Paul both particularly referred to this image.¹⁰ Though the Old Testament referred to God as Father, to many Jews of Jesus' day, this idea seemed to be radically new.

Before continuing with this discussion, a word of caution is in order. We must be careful when using images to describe God, because the best we have on earth is flawed images. God is the Perfect Father, Perfect Mother, Perfect Judge, for example, but no earthly example can ever be said to be perfect. In addition, we must not put any image of Him over any other image. They are all equally true. Finally, we must not allow any image that we develop to cause us to forget that He is the Sovereign, Self-Existent God of the Universe, and that our chief end is to worship Him and enjoy Him. Otherwise, we risk fashioning Him into our image, instead of the other way around.

How is God like a father? When we think of an earthly father, we often get different pictures. One father may be laid back and permissive, another harsh, strict, and demanding. Earthly fathers don't make the greatest models, because none are perfect, but we can

¹⁰ The Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13, is one of the best-known examples. Here Jesus taught the disciples to address God as "Our Father in Heaven." And Paul often used phrases such as "Father," and "Father of glory," etc. Some examples of such verses are Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 8:6; Eph 1:17.

see some general principles in Scripture about what godly fathers look like:

- Godly fathers show love to their children, no matter what a child does.
- Godly fathers teach, train, and discipline their children in the context of love.
- Godly fathers provide for, care for, and bless their children with gifts.
- Godly fathers exercise wisdom, showing mercy and grace when they are needed to help a child grow.

There are, of course, more things that fathers do. However, for the most part, they fall into one of these four broad ideas. In exercising his role, a father will often wear many different hats over the course of a lifetime – referee, mentor, teacher, coach, cheerleader, philosopher, and a host of others.

Can these things be said of the Lord? Scripture affirms that the Lord (our Heavenly Father) does each of these – and in His case, He does them perfectly. Here are just some of the Scriptures that show us:

- *God shows unconditional love to His children, no matter what:* Psalm 103:17; Jer. 31:3; Romans 8:38-39.
- *God teaches, trains, and disciplines His children in the context of love:* Psalm 144:1; 1 Tim. 1:4; Heb. 12:11.
- *God provides for, cares for, and blesses His children with gifts:* Matt. 6:25-33; James 1:17.
- *God exercises wisdom, showing mercy and grace when they are needed to help His children grow:* Ex. 34:6-8; Ezra 7:25; Ecc. 2:26.

When we think about God as Father, we should keep one overarching thing in mind: *God is focused on His glory first, and our good second.* He does want the best for us. His best, which will, at the same time, show His glory.

As we conclude this discussion, it's important to know that because our earthly fathers present, at best, a flawed image of God, many believers struggle with how to relate to Him. We can only grow in Christ to the extent that we relate to Him in a healthy way.

As Dr. Steve Brown used to say, "God is not mad at you." He loves you, more than any earthly father ever could." While our fathers may have been prone to unkind words, anger, or even abuse, our Heavenly Father is full of love and grace toward you. All one need to do is reach out for Him, for He is near to each one of us (Acts 17:27).

Chapter 4

Using the Key: Knowing God

Now that we have discussed the nature and character of the God who calls us to Himself, we want to take this time to ask the question, “So what?” (It was my favorite question as a teacher.) We’ve said that God wants us to know Him, and indeed has made provision for us to know Him. He created us to connect with Him and others. We have talked about His character and how He relates to us. Now we ask, “What do I do with that?”

When thinking about how to apply what we have discussed, the obvious question jumps out: *How do we get to know God?* If He desires us to know Him (not just *about* Him), how do we accomplish that?

Before we begin to talk through an answer to this question, it’s necessary to point out that there are many great resources on this subject. This book is not the final authority when it comes to knowing God personally. At the same time, any book that is written by men can only (hopefully) serve to guide us on a path to knowing Him more.

Now then, just how *does* one get to know the God of the Universe? Thankfully, He has made provision for getting to know Him. It’s like a person who comes to

you and says, “Hey, I want to get to know you, and allow you to get to know me. I know it’s hard for you to get to know me, but I’m going to help you out. I’m going to give you everything you need in order to get to know me.” That’s what the Lord has done. He’s provided all we need. What we have to supply, then, is effort. Friendships and relationships don’t happen just by accident. Real relationships happen intentionally. They take will and intention. (“I like this person. I want to get to know him/her better. Therefore, I’m going to invest the time and effort to do so.”) There are several ways that we can get to know Him.

Study the Scriptures

The Lord has given us the Scriptures, which contain a revelation of Himself and the Gospel. By studying the Scriptures under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we can know God – His heart, His thoughts, His ways.

Notice that I said, “under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.” This can’t be overstressed. The Bible is more than just a series of books and letters. It is not just another man-made book (despite what the skeptics say), but it has as its ultimate author God Himself (2 Tim. 3:16). Because of that, the Bible is a spiritual book, containing spiritual truths.

Why is this important? Because Paul reminds us that “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). Without the new heart and new spirit of the New Covenant (see Part Two), and without

the Holy Spirit's enlightenment, we simply cannot understand and apply the real truth of the Bible.

As we mentioned earlier, there are many great resources on this subject, and there are many different ways to study the Scriptures. For now, we will discuss the simplest and best starting point. Take fifteen minutes out of your day to read the Bible. It's not necessary to devote hours at a time (and sometimes counter-productive). What we are looking for is a *mindset* to hear, apply, and obey what the Spirit shows us in Scripture. To accomplish that, here are a few things to consider:

Time

Set aside a specific time every day. Let it be consistent. While many insist that your "quiet time" should be in the morning, there's no reason (and no real Scriptural support) to be so rigid. Some people are more focused in the morning, others at midday, or even in the evening. The point is simply having a time that is specially set aside for you and the Lord, for the purpose of getting to know Him.

Place

Similar to having a specific time, you'll want to have a specific place set aside for this. This place should be a place that is quiet and free of distractions.

Supplies

Some people prefer to use one specific Bible for this time (and take another Bible to church, for example). Others use the same Bible. Whichever approach you

adopt, you should start with a version of the Bible that you can easily read and understand.¹¹ In addition, you'll want a notebook or journal. We often learn best by writing things down, and these can serve as a reminder of our spiritual journey. Though some people use highlighters and Bible markers, the Bible, a pen/pencil and a notebook/journal are really the only 'things' you need.

Attitude

In addition to your physical supplies, this time should be approached with the correct attitude. While it's tempting to make this time a "have to do so I can check it off my list," it's far better to adopt the attitude of "I get to spend time with my Heavenly Father and get to know Him." And as you grow, you will undoubtedly find that your attitude often is that of "I *need* to spend time with Him." The heart should be open to receive His Word for you today, as He desires to speak to you.

Method

Where to start? What to read? Especially if you are new to the Bible, I recommend you start in the New Testament. Avoid the habit of just randomly picking a place to read each day. Read through a book. Read a little at a time. I recommend that one start with the Gospel of John. Read through that wonderful book

¹¹ There is a plethora of Bible translations today. For a version of the Bible that is easy to read and understand, yet remains faithful to the original text, consider the English Standard Version (ESV), New International Version (NIV), or the New Living Translation (NLT). As you grow in understanding, you'll want to have more than one version on hand for comparison and more serious study, but any of these are great starting points.

before moving on (and sometimes it's good to read through it a second time before moving on). After John, go to 1 John, then Galatians. After Galatians, perhaps consider reading Matthew or Luke. That generally makes for a good starting plan. How much you read is up to you and the Holy Spirit, but try to read a complete thought (not just a single verse – another reason a modern translation can be helpful, being broken into paragraphs). As you read, ask the Holy Spirit to teach you. Some questions you can ask: *What does this teach me about God? About Man? Is there a sin to avoid, or a promise to claim?* Write the date, the reference of the passage, and what you are learning in your notebook/journal.

Regardless of what time, place, or method you use, reading the Bible should be seen as simply a means for you to spend time with the One who wants you to know Him.

Prayer: Talking With the Father

Like reading the Bible, prayer is another way that we can directly encounter and know God. Many people teach their children to “say your prayers,” and many have the idea that prayer is just us talking to God. In truth, prayer is two-way communication.

Many of the things we said above about reading the Bible apply here. You should set aside a specific place and time. Many people make it part of their routine when reading the Bible, and that is a good practice. However, if you want to devote a specific time to prayer alone, that is a good idea as well. The goal of prayer is that it become an attitude of the heart. Paul

wrote, “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). My heart should always be in an attitude of connecting with the Father.

You can use your notebook/journal to note things that you are praying for and when/how they are answered. That makes a great addition to your spiritual journey. You can then look back and remind yourself what others have experienced over the centuries. God is good, and He is faithful.

How does one pray? If you are not used to it, consider looking at the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:9-15. Jesus here gave us a model for prayer. In addition, many who start out use an acronym of ACTS:

- *Adoration*: This is a time of acknowledging who God is — that He is holy, and the Lord of all. It is placing Him in His rightful place.
- *Confession*: This is a time to acknowledge *our* rightful place. We fall short of His glory and His standard. Even though we may be saved, we still fall. John reminds us that “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).
- *Thanksgiving*: This is a time to thank Him for not only who He is, but what He is doing in your life and the lives of others.
- *Supplication*: This is the time to bring specific requests and needs before Him. We are told to ask. And ask in faith. God desires to give us good things, and He has promised to meet all our needs.

After (and during this time), you should take time to be

quiet and listen as the Spirit speaks to your heart. This is what makes prayer two-way communication as opposed to a monologue. Jesus promised that His sheep would hear his voice (John 10:27); all we need do is listen.

Connect with Others

This may seem out of place here. I can know God by connecting and relating to others? Remember that God exists in community, and thus we are created for community. As flawed as we all are (even those of us in the church who love Christ), we still bear God's image, and (for those of us who are saved) have the very life of the Father inside us in the form of the Holy Spirit.

What does it mean to connect with others? Get to know them. Share life with someone. We are prone to keep interactions on the surface. "How's your day?" "Great!" Share what God is doing in your heart and life and be open to allowing others to share the same. We are told to carry each other's burdens (Gal. 6:2). That means to walk with someone through it. Those are the places where we will find the Lord most in human relationships.

These are just some guidelines for getting started on the journey to knowing God. Ultimately the faith journey is highly individualized. I hear the Lord most often in music and reading. Others hear Him in different ways. In the end, what counts is that we are spending time with Him, getting to know Him, and applying what He teaches us to our lives.

PART TWO

The Old and the New

Chapter 5: Seeds of the Gospel

Chapter 6: A Covenant for Israel

Chapter 7: The New Covenant

Chapter 8: Using the Key: The New Covenant and
the Gospel

Chapter 5

Seeds of the Gospel

Let's think back for a moment. Think back with me to what it might have been like in the Garden of Eden. Creation was now perfect; God had declared all He made "very good" (Gen. 1:31). Things were idyllic. And then, it happened. First the woman, then the man, rebelled. They ate of the tree He told them was off-limits.¹² Suddenly there was sin in the creation. A will that wanted its own way was now present. And that sin began to stain *everything*.

One might wonder why God didn't just wipe everything out and start over. "Do over!" But God had a plan. One that would both save His creation *and* display His glory. First, though, He had to deal with the immediate situation. He asked questions of Adam and Eve:

- *Where are you?*
- *Who told you that you were naked?*
- *Have you eaten of that tree that I told you not to eat of?*
- *What have you done?*¹³

The question is often asked (and if it isn't, it *should* be asked), "Why would God ask questions, if He knows

¹² This well-known account is found in Genesis 3:1-7.

¹³ These questions are found in vv. 8-14.

the answers?" The only real reason to ask those questions to Adam and Eve was to bring them a place of repentance. Admit what they had done and turn back to Him in dependence and trust.

As we know from the record, however, this isn't what happened. Adam blamed Eve (and God): "The woman whom *you gave to be with me*, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate" (Gen. 3:12, emphasis added). Eve, in turn, blamed the serpent: "The serpent deceived me, and I ate" (v. 13).¹⁴ Thus, we see the start of a pattern. Man tries to do things his own way, independently of God, and enlists others to cooperate with his goal. When things don't go as expected, he blames the people around him, instead of taking responsibility for his attitudes and actions. This is the heart of sin, and now it had invaded the crowning achievement of God's creation.

So, God pronounces judgement on all involved (vv. 15-19). Humanity is now separated from the Lord by sin. He expels Adam and Eve from the Garden and blocks the way to the Tree of Life. It seems a dark day in creation.

However, the Lord does show mercy and grace to Adam and Eve. First, the text says He makes clothing for them from skins to cover them – a far better solution than fig leaves (v. 21). What this means that an animal had to die because of their sin, foreshadowing the rest of His plan.

Second, in judging the serpent He gives this promise: "I will put enmity between you and the

¹⁴ It's worth noting here that God didn't ask the serpent any questions, since the serpent (i.e., Satan) would never have come to a place of repentance.

woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall crush your head, and you shall strike his heel” (v. 15, NIV).¹⁵ This is the first great promise of a Deliverer in the Bible. It begins what we might call Redemptive History.

Before moving on, we should note that God’s final act – blocking the Tree of Life – is often seen as an act of grace. The teaching goes that if man, in his now sinful condition, had eaten of the Tree of Life, he’d be stuck in that state forever. However, that’s really not the point.

It’s clear from the context that God was preventing anyone from trying to circumvent His judgement, by eating of the Tree of Life. Humanity was always designed to live forever, and the soul/spirit was immortal from the moment of creation. Adam might have thought that He could get around death by eating of the Tree of Life, but that would have only affected His body. Thus, the body would have lived forever. But God had decreed death for eating the tree. Spiritual death (separation from Him), followed by physical death. So, God was blocking the way for Adam or anyone to ‘go around’ that judgement (as we know that mankind is prone to do).

The results of Adam and Eve’s sin can be seen rather quickly. Cain kills his brother Abel. As humanity grows and spreads, the land is filled with such evil and violence that by the time we get to Genesis 6 we read, “The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human

¹⁵ The same word is used for both ‘crush’ and ‘strike’ (as rendered in the NIV). Other translations, such as the ESV translate it as the same word (“bruise,” so in the ESV). We believe the NIV more accurately reflects the tone and intent of the promise, if not the literal translation.

race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time” (Gen. 6:5). God determines to start over. He sends the Flood, which kills every human, animal, bird and plant, except for Noah, his family, and the animals that they took into the ark. The earth begins to be populated again. But soon enough, we see the results of Adam and Eve’s sin crop up, again and again.

This time, however, God does something different. He’s already determined that He will use the human race to bring forth the Deliverer. So, He sets out to put His plan into motion through a man named Abram (later to be known as Abraham).

An Ordinary Man Called to Greatness

Abram starts out as a fairly ordinary guy. We don’t know much about him. We know he was the son of Terah (Gen. 11:27). We know (or can infer) that he was a practical man. He lied twice about Sarai for practical reasons – to stay alive (12:10-20; 20:1-18). We know he had times of putting others first (13:1-13). We also know that he could be decisive, in both his rescue of Lot (14:1-16) and in his bold intercession for the people of Sodom (18:22-33). Finally, we know that his family was on the way to Canaan when they stopped in Haran and settled there (11:31). We don’t know why he chose there, but it’s clear that God had other plans for Abram.

The Lord began simply: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you” (12:1). Turns out Abram had already been headed in that direction – Canaan. Along

with a command came a promise:

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (12:2-3).

There are many great promises in these verses. The one we will focus on, however, is the last one: "In you all the families of the earth will be blessed." The Lord promised that because of Abram, all peoples or families would be blessed. As we will see later, this promise refers to the same Deliverer that was promised in Genesis 3.

This promise by the Lord marks the beginning of what is often called the Abrahamic Covenant. There are several covenants in Scripture given to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David, for example. Though often interpreted to mean "contract," covenants in Scripture are not between equals. God sets out the terms of a covenant for the other party to keep.

Like other covenants in Scripture, the covenant with Abraham is unconditional. There are no conditions. Notice that there is no statement of "if you will." There is only "I will." The only party to the covenant is God. God Himself would be the one who sealed the covenant by walking between the animals (15:1-21).¹⁶ The only requirement of Abraham was faith. And faith was what Abraham had. We read, "And [Abraham] believed the Lord, and He counted it to him

¹⁶ In Genesis 15, God specifies more about His plan. It starts with the creation of the nation of Israel, through the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob). We are told their descendants would be in Egypt for 400 years, but God would bring them back to the Promised Land after that. Again, these are unconditional statements.

as righteousness” (15:6).

There’s one more thing we should discuss before moving on from Abraham – the sign of the covenant. We read in Genesis 17, “This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you” (17:10-11). Whenever God instituted a covenant, He always gave a sign – a way of remembering the covenant. For example, the rainbow was the sign of the covenant He made with Noah (9:8-17).

We should remember that circumcision did not confer righteousness. It merely served as a physical sign of the righteousness that was reckoned to him by God as a result of His faith. When God counted Abraham’s faith as righteousness, Abraham had not yet been circumcised (in fact, God had not even mandated circumcision yet). The Lord always operates on the principle of faith. Salvation, even in the Old Testament, has always been based on faith.

The Abrahamic Covenant forms the basis for the nation of Israel, as well as the next step in the plan of Redemption. Read on to learn about the covenant with Israel.

Chapter 6

A Covenant for Israel

In the previous chapter we began discussing God's dealings with humanity in the Old Testament as a precursor to the Gospel. In this chapter, we'll continue that discussion by moving from the covenant with Abraham to the establishment of Israel and the covenant given to Moses at Sinai. One might wonder why we're spending so much time dwelling on the Old Covenant, when what we should be concerned with is the New.

It's a valid question. And the answer lies in that old maxim of history: Those who do not understand the past are doomed to repeat its mistakes. To properly understand and appreciate the New Covenant requires that we first look at the Old. How did we get here? Why do we need a New Covenant (was there something wrong with the Old)? What does it mean for me? These answers become clear as we look back to the Old Covenant first, and then focus on the New Covenant.

Fulfilling the Promises

Fast forward now several hundred years.¹⁷ All of

¹⁷ The time between the call of Abraham and the Exodus was approximately 500-700 years, according to many biblical experts. That would account for the time of

the Patriarchs are now dead (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and even Joseph who rose to be second-in-command of all Egypt). There was new leadership in Egypt, a new Pharaoh who did not know Joseph (Exodus 1:8). Fearing the Hebrews, the Egyptians enslaved them. According to Scripture, the Lord heard the cry of His covenantal people and sent a deliverer: Moses.

After displaying God's power to Pharaoh via the plagues, Moses now leads the Israelites out of Egypt. Through another miracle of the Lord, Israel crosses the Red Sea on dry ground, while the pursuing Egyptian army is swallowed up. Now at the foot of Mount Sinai, the Lord is ready to establish His covenant with Israel. He begins with words that are very familiar to many of us: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exodus 20:2).¹⁸ This is the basis by which *Yahweh* invokes a covenant with Israel. In essence, the Lord is saying, "You are Mine, I have redeemed you from Pharaoh. Therefore, you shall keep my covenant."

It's important to note, as we mentioned in a previous chapter, that the covenants should not be seen as a modern 'contract' between equals. It is a covenant between a Sovereign Lord and His subjects. As with the Abrahamic Covenant, the sign of this covenant is circumcision. As long as one meets the entrance

the Patriarchs, including Joseph, and the 400 years that the Lord said Israel would be in Egypt.

¹⁸ Some see the Mosaic Covenant as a common form of treaty during that time. The treaty was given by a king (*suerzain*) to subjects he had conquered or freed. The treaty always began with the basis of the treaty. Thus, the words in Exodus 20:2 can be seen as the basis for the covenant. Everything else sets out the terms of the covenant.

requirements, he or she is part of the covenant, receiving the blessings (and curses).

In this passage, commonly known as the Ten Commandments (literally “words”), God sets out the basic standard of conduct for Israel. Later on (much of the rest of Exodus and Leviticus), the Lord gets much more specific. The covenantal rules were to touch every segment of a person’s life, from how they worshipped to how they treated their slave or animals. Rituals for various sacrifices were laid out.

We won’t go into depth about all the laws that were given. As mentioned, the law was to touch every part of a person’s life, down to the deepest motive in the heart.¹⁹ As a means of understanding the Law in light of the New Covenant, we are instead going to summarize the Law’s nature by using two concepts: *external* and *temporal*.

The Law: Here and Now

How is the Law external (outward focused) and temporal (limited in time and space)?²⁰ Let’s consider these points:

Continual Sacrifices

There were many sacrifices prescribed in the Old Testament. The most common was a sacrifice for sin.

¹⁹ By the time of Jesus, the Law had largely become a matter of outward observance. This is why Jesus often scolded the Pharisees for worrying about outward appearances while neglecting the insides (the heart). Their failure to apply the law to the heart, however, did not change it’s original intent.

²⁰ In saying the Law is external, we are not saying that it was only focused on outward behavior. As mentioned earlier, the Law spoke to every part of a person’s life, including attitudes of the heart.

This was done on an individual level as well as a corporate (national) level. At the risk of oversimplifying, the basic idea is this: I have committed a sin, whether intentional or unintentional. To keep covenant with the Lord requires that the sin be atoned for – the Lord is a holy God and does not abide in any type of contamination.

So, instead of me having to die for my sin, an animal is sacrificed in my place. This satisfies the wrath of God against me and atones for my sin. At that moment, because of my faith (shown by my obedience) I'm declared righteous in His sight. All well and good, right? Except that within a few minutes I sin again – either intentionally or unintentionally. Guess what? The cycle has to repeat itself. Day in and day out.

Not only that, but every year there was a Day of Atonement when the High Priest would offer sacrifices on behalf of the nation as a whole. (Incidentally, this is the only time anyone was allowed into the innermost place of the tabernacle or temple, the Holy of Holies. Thus, the people were kept at a distance from the Lord.) And keep in mind that the High Priest had his own sins to atone for! He had to make sacrifices for himself first. The point here is that my sin is never fully put away, never completely dealt with. I keep sinning, and more animals die in my place.

Earthly Blessings

If you read the terms of the covenant carefully, you'll notice an important detail about the blessings and

curses. They are all earthly in nature.²¹ There is no thought or hint of what will happen after death. There is no talk of ‘salvation’ (except from Israel’s enemies).²²

We aren’t saying here that earthly blessings are bad in themselves. The Old Covenant, after all, was given by God. It was good. He gives good gifts to His children. We are saying, however, that the Old Covenant, at best, was limited in its scope.

External Motivation

As we look at the Old Covenant, we also consider the people’s motivation. That is to say, “Why should we obey the Lord?” Some light on this is shed when we read Joshua’s famous challenge to Israel: “Choose this day whom you will serve” (Joshua 24:15). The people responded in this manner:

Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods, for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our fathers up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight and preserved us in all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed. And the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God” (vv. 16-18).

Notice the reasons given for obedience have to do with the blessings they received: Freedom from slavery,

²¹ These can be found in Deuteronomy 28 and 29. Notice the repeated statement, “If you . . .” Thus, if you keep the covenant, walk in the ways of the Lord, these are the blessings you’ll receive. If you turn away from Him, these are the curses.

²² There *are* hints in other passages that mention salvation from sin and being in God’s presence—Psalm 16, for example. But in the Law itself, there were no such thoughts. We won’t explore what that means for those who died in the Old Testament, but suffice to say for now that salvation has always been by faith, and, as with Abraham, faith is credited as righteousness.

great signs done among them, defeat of their enemies, etc. Now, being blessed is of course not a bad thing! Yet, as we see from the record of Israel's history, committing to follow the Lord to gain the blessings and avoid the curses of the Law is not sufficient motivation. Israel repeatedly broke the covenant with the Lord, and thus incurred the curses of the Law. In fact, they were breaking the Law at the very time it was being given to Moses!²³

Something more, then, is needed. External motivation, obeying a law which is outside ourselves is just not enough. You've heard the phrase, "My heart just isn't in it"? That's the problem that Israel had. Their heart was not inclined to obey the Law.

Looking Forward

There are very important events in the sacrificial system that we should touch on before leaving our discussion. These two events are the celebration of Passover and the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*).

Passover: Death Passes Over

The institution of Passover is found in Exodus 12. The Lord was about to deliver the Israelites from Egyptian slavery once and for all. He would do so through the death of the firstborn of every family, from Pharaoh's family to the lowliest slave's family. The only way to avoid death was through blood.

On the tenth day of the month, each family was to take a lamb, without blemish or spot, and keep it with

²³ As the Lord was giving instructions to Moses, Aaron made a golden calf at the urging of the people. This story is found in Exodus 32.

them until the fourteenth day. On that day, the family would slaughter the lamb at twilight (12:3-6). Then they were to take some of the blood and smear it over the doorposts and lintel of the home. As the Lord passed through Egypt, He would see the blood, and thus “pass over” that house, so that the firstborn would not die.

On that same night, each family was to eat the meat of the lamb, roasted over a fire, with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. The unleavened bread was to symbolize their purity (leaven was a symbol of sin, and on the first day, they were to remove all traces of leaven from the house). The bitter herbs were to remind them of the bitter time of slavery that Israel had been delivered from. And the meat itself was to remind them of the animal that had been slain for them in order for them to enter into that freedom.

Before moving to the other important event (Yom Kippur), we will note that Jesus was celebrating the Passover on the night He was to be betrayed. But now, we are getting ahead of ourselves.

The Day of Atonement: Sacrifices for All

Once a year, all Israel would gather for the Day of Atonement. It was the only time that anyone (the High Priest) was allowed into the very presence of God in the tabernacle and temple.²⁴ Even then, there were strict rules about how the High Priest was to prepare himself and the offerings. To fail at any of those was to invite

²⁴ The rules for the Day of Atonement are found in Leviticus 16. The rules apparently were given after two of Aaron’s sons (Nadab and Abihu) died for approaching the Lord’s presence in an unauthorized and reckless manner (Leviticus 10). The text indicates that they offered “unauthorized [lit. *strange*] fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them” (10:1).

the wrath of the Lord.

The High Priest was to first offer a bull as a sin offering for his own sin and that of his house. Then he was to take two goats and cast lots. One goat was to be slain as a sin offering, and the other goat was sent away into the wilderness.²⁵ The priest would place his hands on it, transferring the sin to it. That sin was then ‘sent away,’ a symbolic act of the Lord putting the people’s sin away.

One important thing to notice here is that before the High Priest could do anything else, he had to first offer a sacrifice for himself. Only after doing so could he then carry out the rest of the rituals. This is a very important concept when comparing the Old Covenant to the New Covenant.

What we notice about the Law, then, is that while it is holy and righteous (Rom. 7:12), it had no power within it to help the people obey or become righteous. By and large, the people did not learn to sin less. They simply kept having their sins atoned for. Something new was needed. A better way for God’s people to relate to Him. And as always, it started with God, not man. Read on.

²⁵ There is much uncertainty and debate about this ritual, since it mentions “Azazel.” Regardless of how it is interpreted, the point is that one goat was killed, and the other was released.

Chapter 7

The New Covenant

If one were to stop reading at the end of the last chapter, he may conclude that Israel (and the world) was in a bad state. And that conclusion just might hold water. Israel had a covenant with God that she just could not keep, and the rest of the world was in darkness about the true God, going their own separate ways.²⁶

The Lord, however, was not finished with Israel—or the world. We’ve talked about the beginnings of the Gospel, in the promises made to Eve and Abraham. In this chapter, then, we’re going to talk about the New Covenant—the fulfillment of those promises.²⁷

The New Covenant Promised

As we mentioned, Israel was unable to keep the covenant instituted at Sinai. She continuously went back

²⁶ Paul makes it clear in Romans 1 that the Gentiles (all who are not Jews), have some knowledge of God from creation and conscience. Yet, the Gentiles suppressed the truth of that knowledge and turned away from Yahweh to serve gods of their own imagination and making. The sin of the Gentiles is thus that they did not respond to the light that they had.

²⁷ It should be pointed out that there are some promises (specifically the promises relating to Israel and the thousand-year reign) that have yet to be fulfilled. However, the essential promises made in the New Covenant (that we will talk about in this chapter) have been fulfilled—the only remaining element is the return of the nation of Israel to God and recognizing Christ as her Messiah.

and forth between serving the Lord and worshipping other gods. Finally, the Lord sent Israel into exile. He promised that He would bring them back to their land. But He promised more than that. We read first in Jeremiah,

“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers. . . . I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” (Jer. 31:31-34).

After Jeremiah’s prophecy, the Lord also spoke to Ezekiel about what would happen in the future:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God (Ezek. 36:25-28).

Though there are some other prophecies that mention the New Covenant, they largely parallel these passages, so we will focus on them. Let’s now look at this New Covenant that God promised, and how it compares to the Old Covenant.

First, let’s look at the cleansing. Under the Law, if someone became unclean (either through sin or because of certain diseases, or by touching a dead body, for

example), they had to go through an elaborate ritual of cleansing (and staying away from people). If they, during their time of cleansing, encountered something else unclean, they had to start all over.²⁸

Notice the first thing that the Lord says in the Ezekiel passage: *I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.* The sense of this verse is that “I’ll cleanse you once, and you will be clean once and for all.” No need to repeat the cleansing ritual.

Secondly, as we mentioned, Israel continually failed to keep the covenant, turning from *Yahweh* to serve and worship other gods. For this, Israel was sent into exile. As He promised, God did bring Israel back to the land to begin her restoration. But more was needed. Returning to the Jeremiah and Ezekiel prophecies, we read

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 36:26-27).

There are three big changes here that we need to take note of:

- 1) The law, instead of being an external force to be obeyed, is now part of the person, written on their heart.

²⁸ We read in Hebrews 10:4 that “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” The best, then, that could be said to happen in the Old Testament rituals was that the sin was covered, not done away with. So the person was only *declared* to be clean (that’s how God saw him). In the New Covenant, as we will see, those sins are now *forgiven*, not just covered, and the person is truly clean.

- 2) The person receives a new heart. The “heart of stone” (the old heart that seeks to rebel against God) will be replaced with a “heart of flesh” (a heart that is inclined toward God and His ways).
- 3) Not only that, but now the very Spirit of God will dwell within the person, helping him to obey those things which are now written on the heart.

To summarize, under the new covenant, God’s people will receive a new *status* (forgiven, not just covered), a new *nature* (a heart that wants to obey God), and a new *motivation* (the law is part of us, and the Spirit lives inside us). This is what God promised to His people.²⁹

The New Covenant Instituted

Several hundred years have now passed since the last prophets of the Lord spoke.³⁰ God was now ready to do something new – to bring the New Covenant to realization. In the small village called Nazareth, a young man grows to maturity, after having been born to His mother Mary in a most extraordinary way.

Jesus came on the scene publicly in 26-27 A.D. and began a public ministry of about three years. During that time, He preached, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). The time is fulfilled; God is now

²⁹ Like all God’s covenants, the New Covenant was promised and offered first to Israel. After Israel (as a nation) rejected the covenant through Christ, the covenant was opened to the Gentiles.

³⁰ The time period between the last inspired writing of the Old Testament and the birth of Jesus is often called “the Silent Years,” and lasted approximately 400 years. During this time, many changes were made to the social and political landscape that would help prepare the way for the birth of Jesus and help the spread of the Gospel later.

bringing to fruition what He planted and promised in the Old Testament. And He would bring it to pass through Jesus.

As the ministry of Jesus progresses, He talks often of His death. But there's something strange about His claims. Not only does He claim that He won't stay dead, but also that

- the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28).
- this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins (Matt. 26:28).

In essence, Jesus is saying that His own blood would be the offering necessary to institute the New Covenant.

Approximately three years after beginning His public ministry, Jesus is killed – crucified – by the Roman authorities (having been turned over by the Jewish leadership). Jesus had declared that He was giving up His life voluntarily, and that His life was given for the forgiveness of sin. He died in the place of fallen humanity. This is how the New Covenant was sealed, by the death of the Sacrifice.

In Genesis 22, God directed Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. The son of promise was to be dedicated to the Lord as a burnt offering. Abraham obeyed the Lord and took his son to the mountain that God directed. He went so far as to tie up Isaac. As he was raising the knife to kill his son, God stopped him, providing a ram to die in Isaac's place.

Thousands of years later, God sent His own Son of Promise to be an offering. Not just for one person, but for all humanity. This time, the sacrifice was completed. There would be no ram for Jesus. He was to be the ram for us. He had just celebrated the Passover with His disciples, and now He would be the ultimate Passover lamb for the world.

Newer is Better

There is a well-known saying that asserts, “Newer isn’t always better.” That is very true in many cases. However, when comparing the Old Covenant (instituted by Moses) and the New Covenant (instituted by Jesus), *newer is* actually better. Before moving on, we will briefly compare the two covenants to see why that is true.

The High Priest

As we mentioned, once a year, the High Priest of Israel would enter the Holy of Holies to make sacrifices for the nation. First, however, he had to make atonement for his own sin. Why? Because he was not perfect, of course. He could not represent the people to God or represent God to the people in his unclean sinful state.

In contrast, Jesus (who is the High Priest of the New Covenant) was perfect, totally unstained by sin or imperfection. We read in the book of Hebrews:

For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of

the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself (Heb. 7:26-27).³¹

Thus, Jesus had no need to offer any sacrifice for Himself. Instead, as Hebrews tells us, He offered Himself as *our* sacrifice.

The Sacrifices

Under the Old Covenant, the sacrifices had to be repeated — daily, monthly, and yearly. There was no end in sight. They covered the sin of the people, yet those sins were not actually taken away. Turning again to Hebrews, we learn why: “But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb. 10:3-4). We learn two important things here. First, the sacrifices themselves had the effect of reminding the people of their sin. Second, we learn that their sins were not actually taken away. The sacrifices were inadequate.³²

The sacrifice of Christ, however, is described as being far better. Not only was the sacrifice perfect (see above), but also the sacrifice was 1) human and 2) divine. We see a sacrifice of a human for a human. And because Christ is the Son of God, His sacrifice is sufficient to pay the penalty for all sin. As the writer of

³¹ One of the main goals of the book of Hebrews is to show how the New Covenant is better than the Old.

³² It should be pointed out that the system of sacrifice in the Old Testament was given by God, not man. The system was really based on faith. When the people obeyed the rules and kept the sacrifices, God promised to forgive their sins. Yet, the sacrifices were not enough to really atone for the sins of humanity. God could make such a promise based on Christ’s work on Calvary. That is why many people say that the Old Testament saints were saved “on credit.” They were saved based on their faith and the work of Christ in the future.

Hebrews says in the verse above, His sacrifice was “once for all.” There is no need for the sacrifice to be repeated (which, by the way, is why we read of “the Old Testament *sacrifices* [plural]” but the “*sacrifice* [singular] of Christ”).

As we’ve seen, the New Covenant, which all are invited to be part of, is spoken of as a far better covenant than the Old. Through it, our sins are forgiven, we are cleansed and have the both the desire and the power to live righteously before God. In the next chapter, then, we will look at how an understanding of the truths of the New Covenant can foster our growth in Christ.

Chapter 8

Using the Key: The Gospel and the New Covenant

How does the New Covenant relate to the Gospel? What does it mean for those of us who trust Christ for salvation? In this chapter, we'll wrap up our discussion of the New Covenant as we explore these and related questions, with a view to understanding how the theology of the New Covenant helps us to grow in Christ.

The Basics of the Gospel

To begin, we should remember that God, being an eternal community, created humanity with the desire to have us share in community. We were created to fellowship and connect with Him and others. Whether we acknowledge it or not, that desire for connection with Him is implanted deep in our souls, indeed is at the very center of our being.

At the same time, because He is holy and pure, His standard for fellowship is perfection. Not mostly perfect, not doing my best, but *perfect* – *inside and out*. His holiness can't be compromised by anything. Those who would draw near to Him must do so on His terms.

Unfortunately, we as humans are not perfect. In

fact, we are stained and corrupted by sin. This is readily apparent when we look at the world today, or even look at our own lives honestly. The choice of Adam and Eve to rebel in Eden had far-reaching consequences. Now, every human born is born with that same corruption—a nature that is hostile to God and His ways, seeking to live life independently of God. We are born into a life of sin by nature, and that is only strengthened as we actively choose sin.

Many religions have developed over the years. At its heart, man's religion is man's attempt to reach God. Because of our imperfections, however, God cannot be reached by human effort. The Old Covenant, though it was given by God, stands as a reminder that man cannot attain to righteousness by his own effort or merit.

Think of it in terms of an exam where the passing score is 100%—perfection. You take it very seriously. You take notes. You study hard. You give up time with your friends to study. When the exam time comes, you are prepared. You think through every question carefully before answering. You double-check and triple-check your answers.

When you receive your score, you receive the highest grade in the class—a 99%. Unfortunately, you failed the exam. Now, you didn't fail the exam because you didn't try your best. You know you did, and the instructor knows you did. You failed the test because your score simply did not meet the standard.

What is the solution? Change the conditions of the test? Just give you the extra point? Lower the standard? Some have advocated for all of those solutions. God,

being holy and just, cannot overlook imperfections. He cannot “give you the point” just because you tried your best but fell short. He also cannot lower the standard, for the same reason. Instead, what God has done is allow Someone else to take the test in your place.

Christ perfectly fulfilled all the law. No sin was found in Him, as we mentioned in the last chapter. Because Christ is our representative, His righteousness is credited to us, just as Abraham “believed the Lord, and He counted it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). At the same time, God’s justice demands that the penalty for our sin be paid. Because of His great love for us, the Father sent Christ to be our substitute. He bore God’s wrath on our behalf, even though He had no sin. The death He died was for us.

The New Covenant and Us

What does this have to do with our discussion of the New Covenant? If you’ve read this far into the book, chances are you know what you have just read as the Gospel. The New Covenant, then, tells us what happens when we obey Jesus’ instruction to “repent and believe the Gospel” (Mark 1:15). As we have mentioned in previous chapters, Israel was unable to obey the Law and thus keep the Old Covenant. The reason for this is what we just identified – the sinful nature passed down from Adam.

You’ve probably heard the expression, “His heart just wasn’t in it.” In the case of keeping the Law, that expression was literally true of Israel – and all of humanity. We just don’t have the ability to obey God’s

law. We are born with a heart that is turned away from God and a will that stubbornly rejects God.

In the previous chapter, we saw that the solution to this is the New Covenant. If you remember, the Lord promised to “give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezek. 36:26). When we trust Christ for our salvation, we are changed. We are given a new heart. A heart that is inclined to listen to and obey the Lord. Thus, we are released from sin’s power over us.

Not only that, but also the Lord promises, “And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (v. 27). Not only do we have a new heart, but now we have the very Spirit of God within us. Now, some may ask, “If I have this new heart, why do I need God’s Spirit inside me?” The answer is twofold. First, we don’t automatically know how to live in the new freedom we have. The Holy Spirit lives inside us to teach us how to walk according to God’s Word. Second, though we have a new heart, we also still have the flesh — that part of the mind that is programmed to think, believe, and live independently of God. And the flesh can be very deceitful. Sometimes what seems right can actually be the wrong thing, and vice versa. The Spirit lives inside us to help us.

Paul makes it clear in his writings that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). The change that I mentioned above *has already* taken place. It is not something that we have to wish or pray hard

enough about. What we have to do is simply believe the truth of it and act accordingly. That is, “I am not that person anymore. I am a new creation in Christ. I don’t have to follow the old way of doing things.”

Will we become perfect in this lifetime? Contrary to some people’s views, no. While we are to strive for the goal of becoming like Christ (Phil. 3:12-13), we are also to recognize that full redemption (the eradication of the flesh) still awaits us in eternity.³³

Will we grow and become more like Christ? Absolutely, as we walk by faith, obeying what He teaches us, letting His Spirit transform us from the inside out. Salvation and entry into the New Covenant is not the end of the road, it’s just the beginning.

³³ 1 John 1:5-10 makes it clear that to suggest that we will be free of sin in this lifetime is a lie and leads to self-deception. While John does say, “I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin,” he is quick to add, “But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 John 2:1). The meaning, then, is the same as what Paul wrote. We are to strive to walk as Christ walked and become like Him, yet we realize that we are still subject to the flesh and live in a fallen world.

PART THREE

Who Are You?

Chapter 9: Who Are You?

Chapter 10: Fallen Image-Bearers

Chapter 11: The New Birth and New Us

Chapter 12: Using the Key: Understanding Our Identity

Chapter 9

Who Are You?

“Hey! Who are you?” That question is both common and vague. Who am I? What makes me who I am? If I tell you my name, is that enough for you to know who I am? That’s just a label to identify me from you. If I tell you I am a teacher, a writer, book enthusiast, those are careers and hobbies. If I tell you more things about me, such as my favorite color, song, or the fact that I don’t like brussels sprouts, is that who I am?

When we strip away everything else, what will we find at the very center, the core, of our being? Before answering that question, we need to first answer another one: *What does it matter?* Does it matter how I perceive myself or others? If so, why? I suggest that an understanding of identity (“who we are”) is vital to our emotional health and spiritual growth.

One of the most basic things that guides behavior is what a person believes/thinks about him/herself. From a young age, we all develop images and beliefs about ourselves, others, and the way the world works. Besides the goals that we set for ourselves, these images of ourselves are the strongest influencers of our actions.

- If I perceive myself as someone clumsy and socially inept (perhaps because of criticism from important people in my life), then I am more likely to reinforce that belief with my behavior.
- If I perceive myself as highly intelligent and

reasonable, then I will tend to relate to people on an intellectual level, and perhaps be offended when my reasoning or intelligence is called into question.

To put it another more succinct way: A teacher teaches. A runner runs. That's who they are (or who they see themselves as) and thus that's what they do. Likewise, to look at a common phrase in Christian circles ("a sinner saved by grace"), a sinner sins. There is a well-known proverb that says, "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Prov. 23:7, KJV). While we should not stretch that thought to the extreme, it nonetheless bears true when we look at our behaviors honestly.

A parallel question to this discussion is that of how *the Lord* sees us. Since He is our Creator, His opinion should be the determining factor. Sadly, though, that is not always (or usually) the case. But now we are getting ahead of ourselves again.

The Core of Humanity

What does it mean to be human? What sets us apart from the animals? What defines who we are, who we can become? To answer these questions, we must look back again to creation. We read again those famous words:

Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over . . . [everything] on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:26-27).

We touched on this a bit in Part One. God created humanity "in His image." *We are first and foremost image-*

bearers of God. As we will discuss in the next chapter, we are fallen image-bearers; the image has been marred by sin, though not lost entirely. Any understanding of our identity must be based on the idea of humans as God's image-bearers.

The question naturally arises, though: *What does it mean to be made in the image of God?* We know that God is spirit (John 4:24), and so His image does not denote specific physical characteristics.³⁴ The meaning of "the image of God" has been debated by Bible students and theologians for centuries. When we consider in what ways we are similar to God, and what makes us different from the animals, we begin to an approach an understanding of what it means to be made in His image.

I suggest that there are four capabilities or capacities that make us similar to God.³⁵ When we take these capacities together, we have at least a basic understanding of "the image of God." Of course, we must remember that we are not exact copies. There *are* differences. The extent of those differences, however, lies in the fact that God is an infinite, fully independent being, whereas we are created — thus finite and dependent — beings. We'll spend the rest of the chapter discussing these capacities.

³⁴ It's true that, as a friend pointed out, God does speak of Himself as having both a face and a back (Ex. 33:20-23). However, even then there's no suggestion that humanity's physical features were patterned after God and are not the primary focus of the Scriptural concept.

³⁵ I am indebted to Dr. Larry Crabb and his book *Understanding People: Why We Long for Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013) for his insights on this subject. For a fuller explanation of these concepts and their implications for spiritual growth, his book would be an excellent place to start.

Deeply Longing

As a personal being (not an “it” but a “He/Him”), God has desires, many of which can be described more accurately as *deep longings*. We catch a glimpse of the intensity of these longings when we read His cry for His people:

How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender (Hos. 11:8).

In this verse, God is longing, earnestly desiring, for His people to turn back to Him in restoration.

In the same way, we are personal beings. Thus, in a similar fashion, the psalmist describes himself as having a deep longing. In Psalm 42:1-2 we read, “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” And again, we are told in Psalm 63:1, “O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” These verses describe someone who has a *deep longing* for God and fellowship with Him.

Evaluative Thinking

In addition to having the capacity for deep longings, both God and humanity are capable of rational and evaluative thinking. We read in Genesis 6:5 that “[t]he Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” God

looked at the circumstances and facts, and drew a conclusion based on them.³⁶

In the same manner, we know that humanity is capable of rational thought. In the above verse, for example, it is the “thoughts” that were evil. Humanity, by and large, can evaluate data and draw conclusions. The difference between the Lord’s ability and ours, again, lies in the essential difference between God and mankind. We only see a limited amount of data, while God sees everything all at once, for example. Yet, we *are* still able to think and evaluate.

Active Choosing

We know from Scripture that God directs all things according to his “purposes.” He purposes, or chooses, to set certain things and take certain actions. Everything He does is done “according to the counsel of His will” (Eph. 1:9-11).

Likewise, humans are treated in Scripture as responsible beings, able to choose between courses of action. God told Israel, “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live” (Deut. 30:19). Joshua likewise exhorted Israel many years later, “Choose this day whom you will serve” (Josh. 24:15). Again, the difference lies in the fact that we are finite, dependent beings, as contrasted with the omniscience and self-sufficiency of God.

³⁶ God, being God, already knew the ends from the beginnings. This discussion of His ability to think rationally is not meant to take away from that. However, Scripture does make it clear that the Lord has thought processes, which are higher than ours (Isa. 55:9).

Emotionally Experiencing

In addition to the capacity to long, think, and choose, God has the capacity to experience things emotionally – to feel. God was “grieved” when He saw the wickedness of humanity (Gen. 6:6). The Lord Jesus felt sadness when His friend Lazarus died (John 11:33-36). He was angry with those who had turned His Father’s house into a place of commercialism (John 2:14-17). He is pleased (a pleasant emotion) when we do His will (Heb. 13:21).

We need only look around at others (and ourselves) to know that humanity experiences the world emotionally. But, just a few examples from Scripture:

- Nehemiah’s response to hearing that the walls of Jerusalem were in ruins: “As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven” (Neh. 1:4).
- Job reported feeling like he was “churning inside” during his emotional struggles (Job 30:27).
- Peter “wept bitterly” when Jesus looked at him, knowing that he had denied Christ (Matt. 26:75).

In the likeness of God, people can also experience their world emotionally.

These four capacities are at the center of what it means to be a person, and thus what it means to be an image-bearer of God. Though the extent to which we as humans have the same capacity is very limited, we are nonetheless little reproductions of God. We bear His

image, and any understanding of identity, who we are, must start here. But humanity has a problem—namely the Fall. What did the Fall do, if anything, to the image that mankind bears? That is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 10

Fallen Image-Bearers

If humanity was created in God's image, as little reproductions of Him, then what happened to that image at the Fall? Our view of this will stem somewhat from our perspective of what it means to be made in His image.

Some believe that God's image was lost altogether in humanity in the Fall. However, if one adopts the view that was presented in Chapter 9, that would mean that we would cease, on some level, to be persons. On the other hand, some believe that, as far as God's image in humanity goes, nothing changed. We continue to carry His image fully. Yet, this view – the “goodness of humanity – denies both biblical and contemporary evidence to the contrary.

It's clear that *something* happened to change humanity at the time of the Fall. Humanity (in the persons of Adam and Eve) went from walking with God to murder (Cain) and a land of violence and wickedness (Genesis 6). It's equally clear, however, that humanity continued to have the capacity to long deeply, think rationally, choose between courses of action, and feel and express emotions.

A Corrupted Heart

If, as we've suggested, those four capacities represent what it means for humanity to bear God's image, then that means that God's image is still present. And if that is the case, then what is it about humanity that is "fallen"? There are at least three places in Scripture that give us insight into this question:

- "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). Here we are told that the "intention of the thoughts of his *heart* was only evil" (emphasis added).
- "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it" (Jer. 17:9). Here, the prophet reports that the *heart* of man is deceitful and sick.
- "But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the *heart*, and this defiles a person. For out of the *heart* come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander" (Matt. 15:18-19, emphasis added). Here Jesus implies more than just the fact that words proceed from the heart. He makes a statement about the heart of fallen humanity. The evil things proceed from a heart that is itself fallen and evil.

The ancients viewed the heart as the seat of being for a person. So, when Jesus said that the heart is evil, when Jeremiah speaks of the deceitfulness of the heart, the idea is that the center of the person is turned away from God, and is hostile to Him.

Paul backs this up when he reminds the Christians

of Rome, “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. *All have turned aside*; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one” (Rom. 3:10-12, emphasis added). In this passage, we find the key idea of what the heart of fallen humanity is like. This heart, which all are born with, we’ll call the Sinful Heart. It is a heart that is not inclined to obey God. In fact, it is hostile to God; it seeks to find life apart from God and His commands. As we identified earlier, this is sin at its core – the demand to find life apart from God.

If you’ll remember, one of the promises of the New Covenant is that of a “new heart and a new spirit.” The believer is given a heart that is *inclined toward God*, not away from Him. This heart, which we’ll call the Spiritual Heart, longs to connect with God, know Him and obey Him. Unfortunately, fallen humanity does not possess this heart.

A Tarnished Image

If fallen humans have a heart that is indeed sinful, turned away from God, what does that mean for the image of God that they bear? How does the Sinful Heart impact the four capacities we identified earlier? We’ll now look at each one to see how the Sinful Heart turns every part of fallen humanity away from God.

Unfulfilled Longings

The first capacity that we identified had to do with the capacity to have *deep longings*. These longings are much more than simple desires. When God created Adam, He placed two central longings into Adam’s

being, that we see in Scripture.

- A longing for *impact* (Gen. 1:26). Man was created for a specific purpose and to have meaningful impact in his world. Thus, all of us, from the moment we are born, want to have purpose and impact.
- A longing for *relationship*. When God first created Adam, he had the longing and ability to connect with God in relationship (because God Himself exists in an Eternal Community). After God created Adam, He said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Gen. 2:18). The opposite of “alone” is to be in relationship. God didn’t create Eve just as another person to walk the earth. He created her *for Adam*, so that they could connect in relationship.

What happened to those longings after the fall? They did not cease or disappear. Humanity still has those deep longings. The problem, however, is what the Lord identified through the prophet Jeremiah: “[M]y people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water” (Jer. 2:13).

Let’s notice a few things from this verse. First, it’s clear that humanity still has deep longings that cry out to be satisfied. One doesn’t build cisterns except to find water. By implication then, man is not condemned for being thirsty. These longings are legitimate. Second, mankind left the true Satisfier and tried to do things

their own way. As we mentioned earlier, this is at the core of what sin is – seeking life and satisfaction apart from God. The problem is that when we do that, we find temporal satisfaction, but eventually that cistern runs dry. (There *is*, after all, pleasure in sin for a season, maybe even a long season, but it is never complete satisfaction.)

There are only a few routes that the fallen man can take when it comes to dealing with such deep longings:

- He may recognize legitimate longings and seek satisfaction by illegitimate means.
- He may substitute other desires and decide that if he can be satisfied in these ways (whether it be money, fame, drugs, sex, etc.), he will have life.

Notice that I did not list the route of meeting legitimate desires (relationship and impact) by legitimate means. Why? Because fallen man does not have that capacity. His heart, his very being, is centered on finding life apart from God. To do so, He must either reject God as the ultimate Satisfier, or create a god (or gods) in his own image that will give him what he wants. In any event, his longings remain largely unfulfilled.

Darkened Minds

In addition to seeking to satisfy desires and longings on his own man's thoughts and understanding became warped. Paul calls such thoughts "darkened" (Eph. 4:18). When describing the sin of mankind (particularly the Gentles), he gives an even more detailed assessment: "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him,

but they became *futile in their thinking*, and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Rom. 1:21). The Sinful Heart thus infects the mind and thinking processes.

Men and women, from a young age, form images about themselves, others, God, and how the world works. In fallen mankind, these images are wrong. That’s one thing Paul meant when he wrote that “they exchanged the truth of God for a lie” (Rom. 1:25). Fallen humans simply don’t think right. And they stubbornly cling to their darkened understanding because they desperately want to find life apart from God. Their goal is set; thus they will do whatever is necessary in an attempt to reach that goal.

This is why Paul exhorts Christians to be transformed through the renewing of the mind (Rom. 12:2). When one is reborn, those images are not magically erased. They persist in the mind, and thus must be replaced by correct images.³⁷ As redeemed men and women begin to think clearly and correctly, they begin to be more like Christ.

Foolish Choices

When discussing the elements of personhood, those capacities that make up “in God’s image,” we identified the ability to *choose* as one of them. Humans can think, weigh options, and make a choice. We call that being responsible moral agents (meaning humans are responsible and accountable for their choices and

³⁷ There is much more to transformation, but the mind is the starting point. At the core of the flesh is that same desire to find life apart from God. Thus, any thought pattern or desire that is based upon that must be exposed and forsaken. This goes much deeper than just memorizing Scripture and applying its truths to how I live.

actions). What has happened to this ability as a result of the Fall?

Because the fallen man is controlled by the Sinful Heart, and seeks to satisfy his longings (both legitimate and illegitimate) independently of God, he creates images and beliefs about himself, God, others, and the world that strengthen the illusion that he can fulfill those longings without God. As a result, his thought processes are turned in that direction. They have been corrupted (or “darkened,” in Paul’s language). Thus, with darkened understanding and corrupted thought processes, the choices he makes will likewise be corrupted. Fallen man makes choices to preserve his control of his own life, seeking to find life apart from God, instead of finding life of His terms. Every choice that is made by fallen man thus has some element of self-interest hidden in it.

We should make one final (yet important) observation before moving on. The Bible calls fallen humanity “slaves to sin” (John 8:34; Rom. 6:15-23). However, at the same time the Bible makes it equally clear that the choices made by fallen man are true choices. It’s not that he is compelled by something outside himself. The blindness he has toward God’s word (1 Cor. 2:14) is *chosen* blindness. The stubborn refusal to come to God on His terms so that he may have real life (John 5:39-40) is *willful* stubbornness. Humanity has not lost the *ability* to choose. It is rather that humanity makes *foolish choices* and can do nothing else.

*Unpleasant Emotion*³⁸

I often wonder what life must have been like in the Garden of Eden before the Fall. None of us since Adam know what it's like to live in a world without pain or unpleasant emotions. Yet that's exactly one of the biggest side effects (though largely overlooked) of the fall.

Without getting too technical (and at the risk of oversimplifying things), we experience emotions when we interact with our world. Pleasant actions (whether done by us or by others) often generate what we might call pleasant emotions. When we have moments of closeness with a spouse or loved one, those moments generate pleasant feelings (love, peace, security, etc.). On the other hand, when unpleasant things happen (either to us, to someone else, or done by us), those also generate emotions – unpleasant ones. They can range from sadness to rage. Thus, without any unpleasantness in the world, there would cease to be unpleasant emotions.

We should keep in mind that mankind was an emotional creature from the moment of creation. Part of “in God's image” is the ability to experience our world emotionally. After the fall, however, we have two problems. First is the very presence of unpleasant emotion (which was never God's original design). Those are bad enough.

The second problem is what we do with them

³⁸ In the discussion that follows, we are discussing what we might call “naturally occurring” emotions—those emotions that we experience as a result of interacting with our world. Emotions can also change due to changes in body chemistry or the presence of drugs. In this discussion, however, we'll limit ourselves to emotions that are experienced naturally.

(and this goes for both pleasant *and* unpleasant emotions). Fallen man, we have said, always seeks to find fulfillment and life outside of and apart from God. He thus uses his emotions to reinforce that desire.

Let's consider a simple example. A young girl grows up being laughed at for being awkward and clumsy (unpleasant emotions result). In her search for relationship and impact (those deep longings), she comes up with ways to get others to accept her. She soon discovers that she is highly intelligent, more so than her peers. When she engages in intellectual discussions, people are drawn to her and give her the affirmation her soul craves (resulting in pleasant emotions). She has "used" her emotions to maintain her desire for independence.

Totally Corrupted

The view we've put forth here is what the Reformers called *total depravity*. The idea is not that we are as "bad as we can be." Rather, the idea is that sin has stained and corrupted *every part* of fallen man, from his heart to his thoughts, choices, and emotions. While still bearing God's image, that image has been badly marred. Every part of fallen man cooperates in his desire to find life apart from God. In the next chapter we'll see what happens to one who undergoes the New Birth. Read on.

Chapter 11

The New Birth and New Us

In the previous chapter, we saw how things changed for humanity after the Fall. Because of Adam's sin, every part of man's nature is skewed and corrupted toward the goal of living life apart from God. The image of God that each of us bear is still present, therefore, though badly marred by sin.

Like our discussion of the Old and New Covenants (see Part Two), to fully understand our identity it was first necessary to determine our starting point and what changes when a person trusts Christ for salvation.

Before beginning this discussion, I should note that there is honest disagreement on this topic in the church. The views range from the idea that very little actual change occurred to the idea that the person is now virtually sinless. We won't explore all these views for the sake of space. However, let it be said here that

- 1) The Bible does make it clear that those who are in Christ are new creations (2 Cor. 5:17). Something *did* in fact change; it's not a fantasy or exercise in positive thinking.
- 2) At the same time, to hold out the idea that a redeemed person can be sinless this side of eternity lacks real biblical support. While growing

in Christ is the goal, both Paul and John affirm that we have not and will not reach that goal until Christ returns (Phil. 3:12-16; 1 John 1:5-10).

Having established those two anchor points, we'll begin to look at the new birth.

What is Different About Us?

What changed about us the moment we trusted Christ for salvation? To answer this question, we need to go back to the promises of the New Covenant. We have looked at them several times in our discussions, but they are central in understanding the Gospel and spiritual growth. Instead of repeating previous discussions, we will simply summarize the key promises here.

A New Heart

We read in Ezekiel that the Lord promises, "And I will give you a new heart. . . . I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezek. 36:26). The first thing that changes about a person who is born again is that he or she receives a new heart. If you'll recall, we said that fallen man has a heart (the Sinful Heart) that is turned away from God. This heart seeks to live life independently of God and His commands. Its mantra is: "You can do it your own way. Life is found in independence!"

God, however, promises a new heart to those who trust Him for salvation. This heart we named the Spiritual Heart. Instead of being turned away from God, it's turned to Him. It seeks to know Him and live in His

ways. The mantra of the Spiritual Heart is: “Life is only found in knowing and following Christ! Dependence on Him is life.”

The heart, you’ll recall, was regarded by the ancients as the center of being — the core of a person, if you will. What God is saying, then, is that the very center of who we are is changed. Now, we *want* to know God. In fact, we *long* to know Him.³⁹

A New Status

In addition to receiving a new heart, the Lord also promised that he would “sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you” (Ezek. 35:25). Under the Old Covenant, when a person was unclean, whether because of sin or some other cause, he or she had to offer sacrifices to be cleansed. In some cases, he or she would even have to go outside the camp for a certain period.⁴⁰ After being cleansed, of course, if the person became unclean through sin or just through living, the sacrifice had to be repeated.

In the New Covenant, as we mentioned in Chapter 7, God promised to cleanse the one who came to Him in faith. The sense of the promise is “cleanse once and for all.” The sacrifice was made once (in the person of Christ), and will never need to be repeated.⁴¹

³⁹ All humanity was created with a longing to be in a relationship with God (one of our two deepest longings, see Chapter 9). However, the unregenerate man seeks to fill those longings with anything outside God because the Sinful Heart is committed to independence. The Spiritual Heart, on the other hand, desires to draw close to God, knowing that God is the only true Satisfier.

⁴⁰ This was particularly true in the case of leprosy and similar skin diseases.

⁴¹ A question might be raised at this point about Jesus’ words concerning foot washing. He said, “The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet,

Thus, whereas we were unclean and defiled before, now we are clean by Christ's sacrifice. Our status has been changed.

A New Motivation

In addition to a new heart and a new status, God also promises something else. He promises, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jer. 31:33). Under the Old Covenant, the law was outside the people. It was written first on stone tablets, and then on scrolls. It was God's standard to obey.

Not only does the reborn person have the Spiritual Heart, but that heart actually has the law written upon it. God's law is now part of me. I obey it because 1) I want to please my Father, and 2) it's who I am as a child of God (we'll come back to this second point later). Our motivation for drawing close to God and obeying Him is now internal.

A New Power

As if all of that weren't enough (sadly, it still is not until we get to heaven), God promises one more thing in the New Covenant. Not only do we have a new heart, new status, and new motivation, but also, we have a

but is completely clean" (John 13:10). And in 1 John 1:5-10, John reminds us that if we walk in the light and confess our sins, He will cleanse us from unrighteousness. Note, however, that John tells us that it's His blood that cleanses us (v. 7).

The key difference here is that *the sacrifice does not need to be repeated*. Thus, the words of Jesus in John 13 should be interpreted in this light, and the idea of the feet needing to be washed refers not to our core nature being evil (cp Matt. 15:18, where the heart is said to be unclean or evil) but rather to contamination from sin while living in this fallen world (i.e., it is sin that we practice or that happens to us, instead of who we are).

new power. We read, “I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (Ezek. 36:27).

No longer must we depend on our own willpower and intention to live as God command. We have the very Spirit of God living within us. The Lord Jesus promised His presence with us in the form of the Spirit (John 14:15-26). Paul likewise reminds us that all who have trusted Christ have the Spirit of God (Rom. 8:9-17). In fact, we are told that, “[T]he Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26).

It would seem that we have all that we need to draw close to the Lord, know Him, love Him and obey Him. We have been forgiven, cleansed, given a new heart and given His very presence to help us. If that’s the case ...

Not So Fast

All that we’ve said in the previous is well and good. In fact, it sounds amazing (which it is). To quote a well-known line, “We [still] have a problem.” What’s the problem? The problem is what was not changed.

Remember the four capacities we identified earlier, those things that represent God’s image in us? Those capacities remain as they are.

- We still experience *unfulfilled longings*.
- We still have *minds that need renewing*.
- We still make *foolish choices*.
- We still experience *unpleasant emotions*.

There are several reasons for this. Our longings remain unfulfilled now because 1) our experience of Christ is by faith and 2) the presence of sin still mutes the experience (thus, though we are fully loved and accepted by God, we often do not ‘feel’ it on an experiential level). We still experience unpleasant emotions because 1) we do unpleasant things to others, 2) others do unpleasant things to us, and 3) we live in a fallen world where unpleasant things elicit those emotions.

We’re going to spend the remainder of this chapter dealing with the other two capacities. Our longings and emotions are, at least to an extent, beyond our control.⁴² Our thoughts and choices, however, are under our control, and those are the two things that Scripture commands us to take heed of.

The Enemy Within

What’s the problem with your thoughts and choices? In one word, it’s the *flesh*. The flesh is that part of the mind that has been programmed to think and live independently of God. Remember, the core motivation of the Sinful Heart is to live life apart from God.

Independence is life. Because the heart is at the center of all we are, the mind thus becomes programmed.

A somewhat simplistic example can be seen in computer viruses. You have one central computer, and others connected (by a network). If the central computer

⁴² We can experience *some* satisfaction of some longings through things we do. And emotions largely follow our thought patterns—with some exceptions. Yet, one should never think “I shouldn’t feel that way.” We generally don’t have conscious control of our emotions.

gets infected with a virus, then that virus spreads throughout the whole network. In our example, God has replaced the central computer with a new clean computer. Yet the other parts of us (the other computers) still need to be reprogrammed. So, while we have a new heart (the central computer), our mind needs to be reprogrammed (renewed) to think properly. In one sense, the mind has been enlightened already – that happens at the new birth and allows us to understand God’s truth that we need Him. There is still far to go, however, as new thought patterns are uncovered, repented of, and replaced by God’s thoughts. That is a process that will be complete only when Christ returns.

As we’ve seen in this chapter, a lot has changed for those of us who have been born again by the Spirit. We are indeed new creations (2 Cor. 5:17). When it comes to our identity, we are first and foremost image-bearers of God. Whether we are saved or not, regardless of where our current eternal destiny lies, all humans still *bear the image of God*. When we go back to the opening question of Chapter 9, this should be our first and deepest response – with a whole host of implications.

Yet, we are a fallen race. All of creation – including humanity – is stained and corrupted by sin. Not only were we born with a sinful nature – a heart hostile to God – but we live in a world that is fallen and groans under the bondage of sin (Rom. 8:19-25). We who have been redeemed by Christ now have a new nature, but the struggle to become like Him will

continue until He returns to claim His Bride. How our identity fits into the process of our growth in Christ is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 12

Using the Key: Understanding Our Identity

Now that we have discussed our identity, from where it comes, and what it consists of, the question comes (as with very topic we've talked about), "What do we do with that?" How does knowing and understanding our identity benefit us? And how do we apply that knowledge to our spiritual journey? These are the questions of this chapter.

Identity, Motivation and Behavior

As we think about spiritual growth, we would do well to go beyond outward behavior and look at what lies beneath. Behavior serves merely as an indicator of what is "below the waterline." All behavior has the following characteristics in common:

- All behavior springs from *longings* in our soul. Whether they are the deep longings that only God can ultimately meet, the less crucial but still important relational longings, or the casual desires (to get to work on time, or meet quarterly sales goals), all behaviors start from these longings.⁴³

⁴³ These longings are categorized by what Dr. Crabb calls *crucial* longings (those that only God can meet), *critical* longings (those that are still very important and can to an extent be met in relationships), and *casual* longings (desires that are not

- All behavior is influenced by perceived *identity*. In other words, what we think of ourselves, others, and the world influences our behavior to a large degree.
- All behavior is directed toward meeting certain *goals*. Our behavior never occurs in a vacuum; we don't suddenly wake up one day and decide, "Oh, I think I'll do this or that" without some sort of motivation.

By way of a reminder, I should note that when it comes to our longings, the crucial and critical longings will *never* be fully met in this life. Until we are home with Christ, those longings will be met, at best, imperfectly. At worst, we will be disappointed and let down. In both cases, pain results from unfulfilled longings. Now, at the risk of further oversimplifying matters, let's look at an example of how this might look in the lives of two people.⁴⁴

John's Story

John grew up with an emotionally aloof, yet demanding father. Every attempt at connecting with his dad was rebuffed or ignored. John is criticized at the slightest misstep or mistake. He decides that he must be doing things wrong, and thus sees himself as inadequate to gain his father's acceptance – until the day he discovers his father's love for cars.

relational in nature). See Chapter 5 of *Inside Out* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2015) for his excellent discussion of this.

⁴⁴ These examples do not reflect any specific people. The scenario was chosen because it is a very common thing for adults to struggle with.

John has long had an interest in and a natural talent for restoring and fixing cars. He learns that when he talks to his father about cars and shows his talent, he receives approval from his father for being such a talented mechanic. He is learning to win approval from people by what he can do.

Carolyn's Story

Like John, Carolyn grew up with the same kind of emotionally aloof, demanding father. His cutting remarks about her clumsiness hurt her deeply. She too feels inadequate to gain acceptance from her father. In her case, however, she can find nothing to help her connect with her father.

So, she decides to conceal and deny the pain. She becomes *shy* around people, not wanting to risk further rejection because of her clumsiness. Her feeling of inadequacy toward her father now spreads to men in general.

Two people, living with the same kind of father, sharing the same kind of pain, but taking different paths. A look at the commonalities, though, will reveal some very common ground.

- They both felt *pain* from the rejection of their father, the unfulfilled longing for love and acceptance.
- They began to see themselves as *inadequate* (an identity statement).
- They both developed a *goal*: to not feel the pain of rejection again.

Here is where their paths diverge. John (as many men do) finds a way to gain (at least a measure of) his father's approval. He then might decide that strategy can be used with others. He strives to prove his adequacy as a way to mute the present pain and prevent future pain.

Carolyn, on the other hand, chooses to back away from people (especially men). Perhaps she busies herself in charitable work, coming across as a nice but socially awkward lady. She has muted the pain of her father's rejection as well, but instead of seeking to "win" approval, she refuses to take the risk.

In both cases, John and Carolyn may be unaware of the underlying cause (the pain of an unfulfilled longing). If asked about his interest in cars, John might say, "Oh, my dad got me interested in it" (note how that statement gives credit to his dad, hiding the fact that he uses his talent primarily as a means of gaining approval from his dad). If someone asks Carolyn why she is "shy," she may just shrug it off with, "I've always been this way, it's who I am."

Identity as the Key

By looking at these examples, we can see the importance of a proper understanding of our identity. With that in mind, how do we as followers of Christ apply that to our lives to help us in our journey of maturing in Christ? If we are going to promote a biblical model of spiritual growth, then we must start with *identity*. As we have mentioned, what we do flows from who we are (or at least how we perceive ourselves). A teacher teaches. A runner runs.

When considering who we are, there is a common saying in the church today, “I’m just a sinner saved by grace.” The question must be asked, “Is that really who I am?” It sounds rather humble, but am I still a sinner? Remember what we said: our behavior flows from our identity. Therefore, what does a sinner do? A sinner *sins*. A sinner would be expected to sin.

Let’s remember what we have said about the changes that took place under the New Covenant.

- We are *forgiven* and declared righteous.
- We are no longer unclean, having been *cleansed* from sin.
- We have a new heart. The very center of our being has changed.
- We have been *empowered*, both by our new heart and the Holy Spirit.

Now, if I have the above mindset about myself, am I humble? What makes those statements humbling is this single fact: *I had nothing, not a single thing to do with any of it*. The Lord simply stooped down and saved me, for His eternal purposes. Biblical humility, in contrast to modern thought, is simply thinking of myself as God thinks of me – and knowing that “I am what I am by the grace of God” (1 Cor. 15:10).

In contrast to a *sinner*, Paul calls those of us who are saved *saints* (see Rom. 1:7, 8:27; 1 Cor. 1:2, 6:1-2; Eph. 1:1). Now, if a sinner is expected to sin (it’s what he or she does), a saint would be expected to begin to sin *less*, as he or she grows in the knowledge of God and matures in Christ. What does it mean for us that we are saints? There are several implications that we should

look at:

- The truth of our identity helps defend against attacks by Satan, the accuser of the brethren. We often hear thoughts of condemnation, accusation, and such. I was that person in the past, but now I am a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). I am not that person.
- The truth of our identity helps in our battle against sin. When we were saved, sin's power over us was broken (Rom. 6:14). We are no longer under its authority. Therefore, when we battle against thoughts and actions that are contrary to the Word, we can say, "I'm not that person anymore, and I don't have to live that way anymore. I'm under a new Master."

Nothing I've said here should be taken as a "method." It's not as easy as "1-2-3, I'm mature!" Spiritual growth does not happen because of a formula. Although it's a natural process (saints do grow naturally), it is also a highly individualized journey, reaching down into the very depth of the soul.

In Part Four of this book, we will take what we have learned about these three keys and examine what a biblical model of change and growth might look like. Read on.

PART FOUR

A Biblical Model of Change

Chapter 13: What Does it Mean to Change?

Chapter 14: The Other Ingredients for Change

Chapter 15: The Process of Change

Chapter 16: The Road to Change

Chapter 13

What Does it Mean to Change?

When talking about spiritual growth and change, we must first ask the question, “What do we mean by change?” Of course, we all know what *change* means. The dictionary defines *change* as “[to] make or become different.” So, we want to see something different, we want to *be* different in our lives. What we are really asking by that question is, “What is the goal of Christian growth and maturity?”

Another way of looking at that question is to ask, “How do we know that we are growing and maturing? What’s the evidence?” Jesus said that we would know false Christs and teachers by their fruit (7:15-20), and it follows that we can know true disciples by their fruit as well. In fact, Jesus reminded His disciples that the world would know they are His by their love (John 13:35). This single word is the real issue when it comes to maturity.

Foundations for Biblical Change

Many people in talking of change refer to outward circumstances or behavior — those things that people can see. However, if we limit our ideas of biblical change to pursuing a goal of eliminating “bad” behavior (however that phrase is defined in a particular Christian community), we will see only outer behavior

modifications based on some standards external to us. A group of people tried that about 2,000 years ago.

The Pharisees in Jesus' day were experts of adapting their outer behavior to fit the demands of the law (which they cleverly interpreted to help themselves out). Yet, Jesus' strongest words are often directed at them. Read just a couple of comments by Jesus:

- "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20).
- "You clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. . . . For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matt. 23:25-28).

Now, get this: The Pharisees were the religious experts of the day. If anyone knew the Law, they did. They knew it backwards and forwards. They kept the commandments. They kept the fasts. Yet, Jesus essentially said, "That's not enough. Righteousness that is only outward is not righteousness at all."⁴⁵ As we said

⁴⁵ It's important to mention in this discussion that Jesus did not condemn the Pharisees for keeping the Law. Rather, He condemned them for applying the demands of the Law only to outward behavior. In that same section of Scripture, He approved the Pharisees' for "[tithing] mint and dill and cumin," yet rebuked them for "[neglecting] the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness." He

in a previous chapter, the Law was intended to govern *every* part of a person's life, even the thoughts and intents of the heart.

In order to promote a biblical model of change, then, requires that we go much deeper than outward behavior. So, this becomes our first foundation for change: *Biblical change must start from the inside, with attitudes of the heart.* Anything less than that will put us back in the same boat as the Pharisees.

When asking what kind of change we are looking for, we next should turn to a very familiar statement of Jesus. A lawyer decided to ask Him what the greatest commandment of all was — that is, what is most important. Jesus replied,

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets (Matt 22:37-40).

Jesus said that the Greatest commandments can be summarized in one word: love. We are to move toward (“draw near to” in biblical language) God (Heb. 4:16; 7:19, 25; James 4:8) and others in love. The Great Commandments are *relational* commandments. Thus, our second foundation for biblical change becomes: *Biblical change is change that moves a person toward God and other people in love.* Any change that results in a direction away from God or other people is not biblical change.

Putting these first two ideas together (that biblical

concluded by saying, “These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others” (see Matt. 23:23-24).

change begins on the inside and moves a person toward and others), we begin to see a third element of biblical change. If the goal of biblical change is to move us toward God in dependence and obedience, then it follows that any attitude that directs us the other way is sinful. Likewise, any attitude that causes us to protect ourselves, rather than be lovingly involved with people is sinful. The third foundation of biblical change, then, is: *Biblical change involves exposing and repenting of thoughts and attitudes that promote self-protection over loving involvement.*⁴⁶ This is the goal of biblical change.

The Goal of Love

If we understand biblical change as moving toward God and others in loving involvement, it follows that anything in us that prevents that is sinful. It's entirely possible to have nice, socially acceptable behavior that subtly violates the command to love. This is particularly true if the behavior is designed to protect ourselves from criticism, rejection, or other emotional pain. What does love look like? The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to answering that question.

Most of us are familiar with the famous passage on love written by Paul. In context, he wrote what we know as 1 Cor. 13 to show why love was far superior to any spiritual gift. In doing so, however, he gave us a wonderful definition of what it means to love.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if

⁴⁶ The use of the word *involvement* when it comes to God may cause some confusion. We can be said to be lovingly involved with God when we commune with Him openly, allow His Spirit to search us, and respond in faith and obedience.

I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends (1 Cor. 13:1-8a).

Before we get into the specifics of Paul's definition of love, let's first focus on vv. 1-3, where Paul tells us how important love is.

Notice that he focuses not only on spiritual gifts (tongues and prophecy), but also on what we would call good deeds (give away all I have – presumably to the poor and give my body to be burned – as a martyr). His conclusion is that if he engages in those things without love, they mean nothing.

These things are, of course, good things. It's right to give to the needy. If we are called to do so, we are to be willing to do so with a joyful heart, knowing we have a reward in heaven. Tongues and prophecy are good, being given by God for the edification of the church. When, however, any of these things are practiced with any motive other than pure love for God and for others, they become corrupted.

What does this love look like? Paul gives us a snapshot of what a person walking in love is like:

- He is *patient*, willing to wait, not insisting that others meet his schedule.
- He is *kind*, not speaking harshly to others out of irritation, anger, fear, or control.
- He is *humble*, not boastful, arrogant or proud,

knowing that all he has is given by the Lord.

- He places *others* before himself, not insisting that things be done his way or for him alone.
- He rejoices with the *truth*, not in wrongdoing, knowing that the truth (and the Truth in Christ) sets people free.
- He is able to *bear, believe, hope, and endure* all things because he knows that he was designed for something far better (heaven) and that is his inheritance.

This, of course, is a perfect picture of the Lord Jesus. He embodies all these qualities and showed them during this public ministry on earth.

Before moving on, let's review how we have framed the goal of biblical change:

- *Biblical change must start from the inside, with attitudes of the heart.* Without this, we are no better off than the Pharisees of old.
- *Biblical change is change that moves a person toward God and other people in love.* Since the Greatest Commandments are centered on loving God and others, anything short of this is sin.
- *Biblical change involves exposing and repenting of thoughts and attitudes that promote self-protection over loving involvement.* Any model of change that does not include forsaking these attitudes and thoughts cannot be called biblical.

When we talk of biblical change, this is what we're aiming for: We are eliminating everything that would

hinder us from moving toward God in loving obedience and toward others in loving, sacrificial service. In the next chapter, we'll continue our discussion of biblical change, by looking at what's necessary to accomplish that—namely, repentance and faith.

Chapter 14

The Other Ingredients for Change

Having laid a foundation for biblical change — knowing where we are headed, you will — we'll now turn to what we else we need to see that accomplished. We've already looked at the keys to growth in Christ. To review those keys:

- A biblical understanding of *who God is*.
- A biblical understanding of *the New Covenant*.
- A biblical understanding of *our identity*.

In addition to those ideas there are two other things that are needed for true biblical change. Paul gave us a good summary of what is required for biblical change in his farewell message to the elders at Ephesus. He spoke of “testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of *repentance toward God* and of *faith in our Lord Jesus Christ*” (Acts 20:21, emphasis added).

The two ingredients that we need for true biblical change are repentance and faith. This chapter will be devoted to looking at these two important concepts, which may be summarized like this: *Biblical change happens as we, in repentance, turn away from sinful attitudes, thoughts, or actions and turn to Christ in faith and dependence.*

Sparkling Change Through Repentance⁴⁷

What is repentance? What does it mean to “repent”? If we are to practice repentance toward God, then we need to know what exactly repentance is. The dictionary defines *repent* this way: “[To] feel or express sincere regret or remorse about one's wrongdoing or sin; to view or think of (an action or omission) with deep regret or remorse.” From this we might conclude that *repent* simply means feeling remorse or saying, “I’m very sorry.”

The Bible, however, uses *repent* in a different manner. The word translated *repentance* is the Greek *metanoia*, which means primarily “a change of mind.” More specifically, the word indicates a turning from sin (whether an attitude, thought, or deed) and turning to God. Though some people think *repent* means “to change my ways,” the change of actions is simply a *result* of the change of my mind. This is why John the Baptizer could tell the Pharisees, “Bear fruit in keeping with your repentance” (Matt. 3:8). What he means is, “You say you have changed your mind about what sin is? Show it by your deeds.”

As we think about repentance, we must ask the question, “What are we to repent of?” The answer seems obvious enough: sin. Let’s look at an example to see what I mean, however. Little Johnny comes to his mom and says, “Mom, I lied to you today. I told you Mark hit me first, but really, I hit him first. That was wrong, and I’m sorry. I’m going to tell the truth from

⁴⁷ Though true biblical repentance always includes faith (we turn away from something and turn to Christ in faith), we will discuss faith separately in the next section.

now on.”

Now, has Johnny repented? It certainly sounds like he repented. He acknowledged that what he said was a lie and that it was sin (he changed his mind about that), and he turned toward the truth. So, yes, he did repent of that lie. Consider this, though. What about the underlying attitude that created the lie? Why did he lie? To protect himself from the pain of possible consequences? Because he has learned that lying is a way to protect himself or get what he wants? Has he repented of that? If not, such attitudes will remain, and he will be forced to make that decision again.

Like our first foundation for biblical change, *repentance must go deeper than just the outward acts*. We must, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, look beneath the outward behavior to see the images, beliefs, and attitudes that lead to such acts. All internal sin will have this in common—it will be part of a strategy to protect ourselves from the pain of real relationship (with God or man) and manage life on our own. We must acknowledge the pain that is there, repent of our self-centered strategies to manage life on our own, and admit our need for and dependence on Christ (that’s the next section). This is the essence of repentance. Without this deep repentance, there will be no true change. The best we can hope for is rigid conformity to local standards of conduct.

Continuing Change Through Faith⁴⁸

The second half of our summary of change says

⁴⁸ See Chapter 14 of my previous book, *Unspeakable Joy: Embracing the Way of the Cross* (JPT Books, 2018) for a more in-depth discussion of faith.

that biblical change happens when we “turn to Christ in faith and dependence.” We’ve probed beneath the outward actions to find the hidden motivations. We have exposed them as sinful, self-protective strategies to manage our own lives and keep people at a distance. And we have turned from them, admitting our need for Christ.

The second part of change happens as we then turn *toward* Christ in faith. The writer of Hebrews speaks of the importance of faith: “And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Heb. 11:6). Did you catch that? Without faith it is *impossible* to please God. Not hard, mind you. Impossible. We must have faith.

What is faith? Many people talk about faith. It seems everyone “has faith,” and we hear talk about “different faiths.” To promote biblical change requires a biblical view of faith. The Oxford Dictionary defines faith as “complete trust or confidence in someone or something.” Synonyms of faith include *trust*, *belief*, *confidence*, *reliance*, and *dependence*.

Now, with that definition comes our first observation about faith: *Faith always requires an object*. We place our trust or confidence in someone or something. Though many teach these days, “You just have to have faith,” without naming an object of trust, real faith does not exist without it.

The second thing to notice about faith is that *it leads to action*. Remember that we said our actions are, in large part, influenced by our beliefs? I’m sure you have heard or read this example, but it illustrates the

principle nicely. I walk up to a chair. If I believe the chair is sturdy and will hold me, I will sit in it (i.e., I have faith in the strength of the chair, or in the builders of the chair). If, however, I don't have such confidence, I won't sit in the chair (perhaps the chair looks rickety or wobbly, or there are obvious defects). This is the simplest example of faith, but it's a concrete one. But, this is the point: My faith leads to action. I have confidence in the chair, I sit.

There are many examples of faith in the Bible. Hebrews 11 has a long list of what is commonly called "Heroes of Faith." For now, will simply touch on two of them.

Abraham

We met Abraham (formerly Abram) earlier, when discussing the foundations for the Gospel (see chapter 5). We won't repeat his whole life story here; instead, let's focus on God's call to him. Going back to Genesis 12, we read: "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And . . . I will bless you'" (12:1-2).

God gave Abraham a command and a promise. The only thing required of Abraham was faith. And how do we know he had faith? *Because he went.* He believed the word God spoke to him, and thus He acted accordingly. Again, in Genesis 15, God promised to give Abraham not only a son of his own, but He also said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them. So shall your offspring be" (15:5). In response, we are told that "[Abram] believed the

Lord, and He counted it to him as righteousness” (v. 6). Beyond that biblical affirmation, we also know that Abram had faith because again, he obeyed the Lord’s instructions (see vv. 7-11).

Though there were times when Abraham trusted in his own strategies over God’s (there’s the matter of his twice lying about his wife, for example), he still stands as a great example of faith.

Jesus

Of course, the greatest example of faith in the Bible is the Lord Jesus. He pointedly told the people, “I always do those things that are pleasing to Him” (John 8:29), and “[T]he Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise” (John 5:19). Those two statements speak of a life of the total dependence that Jesus had on His Father.

How do we know that Jesus did indeed live of life of perfect faith? Besides His own assertion, we know that He did because *God raised Him from the dead*. Because Jesus lived a perfect life of obedience and had no sin, His death was not for Himself but for mankind. Had Jesus not been found righteous and perfect, the end would have been His death, just as it was for the heroes of faith of the Old Testament.

A Look at Biblical Faith

So far in our discussion, we have transitioned from a general discussion of faith to discussing how faith looks in the Bible. Let’s now crystallize that discussion with a look at the pillars of faith. We can use

the acronym SOAR to help us out:

- Submission: Biblical faith is always submitted to the will and purposes of God.
- The Object: Biblical faith always has the God of the Bible and Jesus as the object.
- Active: Biblical faith goes beyond mere assent. It is active, spurring the believer to act in obedience.
- Revelation: Biblical faith does not create its own reality (i.e., anything goes). Rather, it responds to the revelation of God's Word.

When we walk in faith, we repent of those things the Lord identifies as sin (even the deep subtle sin) and choose to turn from them, we choose to believe His Word about Himself, us, others, and our world, and we choose to turn to Him in a life of hope, dependence and trust. In so doing we draw close to Him and others in loving involvement. In turn, we have His promise that "[T]hose who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint" (Isa. 40:31).

Chapter 15

The Forces of Change

What causes a person to decide to change? Why is it often so difficult to change? Whether it is addiction, compulsive behavior, or nagging negative thoughts, the struggle to see real change is often a difficult process. In this chapter, we'll look at the forces – the things that push and pull us – in our struggle to change.

The Catalyst for Change

What causes someone to want to change? Whether it's a divorce or something less damaging, what causes the desire to change? What would cause man who has worked for a company for 10 years, moving up in the organization, suddenly decide to change not only jobs but careers? What would make a middle-aged man who's never been married, never even thought about it in the midst of his comfortable life suddenly decide that he wants a wife and family?

Remember what we said earlier about behavior (and any perceived change will be seen by behavior): *All behavior is purposeful in nature.* When I decide to make a change, no matter how “big” or “little” it is, it is because I am not happy with some part of my life – I think there is more and/or better out there.

That feeling that something's just not right,

something's missing, and there's more out there is directly tied to those unfulfilled longings that we mentioned in Part 3. We were created with not only the capacity to long deeply for things, but also built-in longings that only God can satisfy.

When our longings go unmet, it causes pain in our soul. When we seek love from someone and they disappoint us, we feel pain. When we hope to receive affirmation for a job well-done, but instead receive an indifferent response or even rejection, we feel pain.

That pain is much like a light on the dashboard of your car. When the "Check Engine" light comes on, for example, you have a few options:

- You can ignore the light, hoping the problem will just go away.
- You can deny there is a problem (maybe covering the light with tape, for example).
- Or, as the manufacturer intended, you can find out what the problem is, and have it dealt with.⁴⁹

The first option really doesn't work; it's hard to ignore a light staring in your face. So, that usually shifts to the second or third option. Most people would agree that the third option (deal with the problem) is the best option—even those who can't at the moment due to circumstances or finances.

However, the ease with which we may say, "I need to get that looked at" about a mechanical issue is

⁴⁹ One writer gives an additional option, that of lashing out in anger, such as taking a hammer and breaking the light. Many people do that when in the midst of emotional struggles. In the end, however, such behavior results from a desire to deny the problem but the inability to do so.

often lost when it comes to emotional pain. We fear facing such pain; it becomes much easier to just deny it, minimize it, and as much as possible avoid it. Much (I would venture to say *most*) change is that which seeks to deny, minimize and avoid emotional pain.

Biblical change also starts with the pain of unfulfilled longings. (No matter if one is a follower of Christ or not, all will have such pain.) The difference is that biblical change doesn't seek to deny or magically do away with the pain. Instead, biblical change seeks to do away with the self-protective strategies and move toward God and others in loving engagement. Instead of just changing our outward circumstances (spouse, job, church attendance, etc.), biblical change starts on the inside.

The Battle to Change⁵⁰

Why is real change so difficult, often in the most mature believers? Though we may try to act spiritual and deny it, we all struggle to really change in the way that we have described in this book – as deeply and authentically as the Bible demands.

The primary enemy of biblical change in the life of a believer is neither the world nor the devil. Both of these are external to the believer, and (to a certain extent) can be tuned out. The real enemy of the believer is *the flesh*. We identified the flesh as that part of the mind that seeks to live independently of God. Even though the believer has a new heart, the flesh still

⁵⁰ In the discussion that follows, we are speaking primarily of those who have been born again by God's Spirit. The unregenerate man does not have the same struggle, since he is controlled by the Sinful Heart, totally enslaved to the flesh.

remains, having been thoroughly programmed by the Sinful Heart.

Why is the flesh such a difficult enemy? Because the desire to live independent of God can be dressed up and disguised to look so good, nice, even *spiritual*. Paul tells us,

For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do (Gal. 5:17).⁵¹

Every desire of the flesh is opposite of the Spirit. If we look at Paul's list of the works of the flesh in Gal. 5:19-21, we'll see one thing in common: These behaviors represent strategies for

- getting what I want now (numbing the pain of longings that will never be perfectly satisfied);
- managing my life to avoid the pain of unmet longings; and
- using people through control, manipulation, or seeking recognition to get what I want instead of giving to them in loving service.

Remember what we said about biblical change: *Biblical change involves exposing and repenting of thoughts and attitudes that promote self-protection over loving involvement.* The works of the flesh are those strategies that promote self-protection over loving involvement.

How is it, then, that we change? How do we fight the flesh? If we look the above statement, we get a good

⁵¹ Though Paul often uses the "Spirit" to mean the Holy Spirit, we are using the term to include the regenerate heart of the believer as well—every part of the believer that seeks to live in dependence on and trust in God.

summary. We expose the strategies that promote self-protection. To put this concept in biblical language, consider these statements:

Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. . . . For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live (Rom. 8:5, 13).

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12:2).

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh (Gal. 5:16).

For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life (Gal. 6:8).

If we take the above statements and put them in the context of repentance and faith, we begin to see what it is to walk by the Spirit (and thus “put to death [by starvation] the misdeeds of the flesh”). When we expose those sinful strategies and attitudes, we mark them and avoid them. We instead turn to Christ in dependence and trust.

In addition, we sow into the things of the Spirit (and not the flesh), when we continually place our trust in Christ, acknowledging our dependence on Him. We refuse to adopt attitudes of self-protection that deny us the chance to move toward God and others in loving involvement. A big part of this will be the “renewal of the mind” that Paul talks about. We renew our mind by

replacing our thought patterns and attitudes with those embodied in the Bible.

When we experience true biblical change, what is the outcome? We will move toward Christ, trusting Him in everything. No matter what happens, we hold onto the Hope that He offers – not necessarily freedom from present pain, but the Hope of an eternity that will far outweigh the things we experience here. In so doing, we see beginnings of Paul’s great summary of spiritual growth:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law (Gal. 5:22-23).

When we experience true biblical change, we are truly “not under law but under grace” (Rom. 6:14). In the next (and final) chapter, we will review all we have said, bringing our discussion to a close.

Chapter 16

The Road to Change

As we wrap up our discussion of what it is to grow in Christ, we have only begun our journey. The decision to trust Christ fully is both a one-time and an ongoing decision. Each day presents new challenges, new situations and new avenues for the flesh to assert its independence. But each day also presents new opportunities to see God's grace and mercy (which is new every day, Lam. 3:22-23). Each day presents the opportunity to choose to move toward God in dependence, trust, and obedience, while moving toward others in loving involvement and service.

In this final chapter, what we want to do is bring everything together. While it may not be tied in a nice, neat package with a bow on top, I do want to try to bring some order to what we have said. We'll attempt to do this by reviewing four key questions:

- *Why do we seek change?*
- *What is biblical change?*
- *How do we change?*

After our review, we will answer one final question: *What can I expect on the journey?* If you're anything like me, you like to know what's coming up. When our life is such that we don't know what to expect, we often feel

lost and adrift on the sea. Fortunately, the Bible does give us an idea of what we may expect on this journey to growth and change.

Question #1: Why do we change?

All desire for change, comes from a feeling of unmet longings and desires. The feeling may just be gentle nagging that something needs to change, or it may be serious emotional pain that hinders us from functioning in life.

The pain that we feel (no matter the degree) comes from longings that we have inside us. We were created to experience life in a perfect world. When we experience our or others' imperfection, we feel let down, disappointed, angry, etc. And rightly so. We were designed for a different and better world than the one in which we find ourselves. This pain causes us naturally to seek a change. The question becomes, however, what kind of change we will make. Will the changes be superficial, changing only the outward behavior and circumstances? Or will they be true biblical change?

Question #2: What is biblical change?

Everyone can and does make changes to their life. We change jobs, houses, spouses, shirts, interests, etc. quite regularly. But, is that what we mean by biblical change?

Remember that the goal of biblical change is to free the person to *love*. Put another way, biblical change is change that allows a person to move toward Christ in dependence, trust, and obedience, and move toward others in loving involvement and sacrificial service

(foundation #2).

To do this, biblical change must start from the inside, with attitudes of the heart (foundation #1). Change that focuses only on observable actions (through change of circumstance or behavior modification) will not produce the authentic change that the Bible commands of believers. At best, we end up with modern-day Pharisees, committed to behaving according to behavioral standards while at the same time being full of hypocrisy and death.

If biblical change consists of more than just changing the parts of our lives that others see, what is required to do that? When we look inside, we discover attitudes and thoughts that are self-protective in nature, hindering us from loving God and others as we are commanded. Biblical change, then, involves repenting of (changing our minds about) those things, turning away from them, and turning toward Christ in faith (foundation #3). We admit our need and dependence. (Remember that true biblical repentance always includes both the turning 'from' a wrong idea and turning 'toward' Christ in faith.) We cling to Him no matter what, and as we do, we are able to move toward others in love, regardless of the potential for disappointment or pain.

Question #3: How do we effect change?

If biblical change involves repenting of incorrect thoughts and attitudes, how is this accomplished? In order to maintain change and growth, we must adopt the correct attitudes and mindsets. The three keys that we identified earlier in this book (See Parts 1-3) are the

starting points to adopting correct mindsets.

A biblical understanding of God

This is the first and most important key. Why is this so? Because if we hold an incorrect view of God, we likely hold an incorrect view of ourselves, as well as everyone and everything else around us. If we see God as a permissive parent that might scold us for our sin but really does nothing, then we'll tend to think less of our sin and end up being careless in how we relate to others.

If, however, we see God as the Sovereign Lord of the universe who is at the same time our loving heavenly Father, then we will learn to trust and obey Him. In so doing, we are then free to move toward others in love, rather than creating self-protective strategies that violate His call to love others.

A biblical understanding of the New Covenant

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me / I once was lost but now I'm found; was blind but now I see." No truer words were ever written. When we are saved and born again, we move from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. We literally pass from death to life.

Under the New Covenant, we have all the we need to experience real biblical change. We have a new heart that is inclined toward God and seeks to obey Him. We are forgiven of our sins and are no longer under the power of sin — we have an actual choice now in how to live. We have the law written on our new nature and the Holy Spirit living inside us to teach and

help us. The change in us is real, not just some principle that we have to pretend is real.

A biblical understanding of our identity

As we mentioned, there is a common saying in many Christian circles today that sounds quite humble: *I'm just a sinner saved by grace*. Because of the New Covenant, though, that statement is no longer accurate. Instead, the Bible calls us *saints*.

Saint, however, does not mean perfect. We are saints because we have been called and set apart by God. Everything we have has been given by Him to us out of His great love. We are no longer sinners, aliens to the promise, but now we are saints, brothers and sisters, waiting for the inheritance He has promised us, of which the Holy Spirit is the deposit or guarantee. Because we have such hope, we wait eagerly, patiently, and obediently.

Focusing on these three keys – replacing our incorrect images, beliefs, and attitudes with biblical ones – is what Paul calls the renewing of the mind (Rom. 12:2). As we renew our minds, we are better able to identify, with the Spirit's help, the strategies of the flesh. It's a lifelong process that will finally be complete when we see Christ face-to-face.

What to Expect on the Road Home

The journey of change and growth is a long one. It starts at the moment we are saved and continues for the rest of our life. It is marked both by periods of joy and periods of pain. The first thing we should remember

about the journey is this: *We will face pain, tribulation, and hardships*. Jesus promised it (John 16:33). Paul promised it (Acts 14:22).

Pain and difficulties are not, as some suppose, the mark of a believer nor always the result of sin.⁵² Pain and hardships are simply a result of being a fallen (yet redeemed) people living in a fallen world corrupted by sin. Pain in this world, however, is an opportunity to turn to God in faith. The second thing we should remember about the road on which we walk is this: *We are promised that we will never walk it alone*. God promises His people, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Heb. 13:5). He has given the Holy Spirit as the guarantee of that, and He places people in our lives often to be the visible representation of Christ to us (and us to them).

When walking the road of growth and change, it is common to enter periods of extreme darkness. We find ourselves unable to see the light, and are often overwhelmed with doubt, confusion and fear. Not only do we have the promise of His presence with us to sustain us in those times, but we also have this certain hope. The third thing we should remember on our journey is this: *We will make it home*. There is a light at the end of the tunnel. Though we may not see it right now, it is there. We are promised that nothing will separate us from His love (Rom. 8:31-39). God will complete the work He started in us (Phil. 1:6). Our job,

⁵² It is true that the Bible promises that believers will suffer because they are believers—because of the Name of Christ. It’s also true that some pain can be the natural consequences of sin (such as the question asked by the disciples in John 9). However, here we are simply referring to pain in general—the kind of pain that all people suffer, and which will become even more acute for the believer.

then, is to be patient, cooperate with His Spirit, and follow Christ. As we do this, we can expect one more thing. We will know — truly know — the love of God, peace that passes all understanding and joy unspeakable.

Epilogue: The Ultimate Change

Perhaps as you have read this book, you've indeed sensed that you need a change—a real change. You realized that you do not know the Lord Jesus Christ. Turning to Him in faith and trust is the ultimate change, the greatest change, that anyone could ever make.

It may be that you thought you did; perhaps you prayed a prayer as a child or adult at the front of a church. Maybe you made a decision out of a fear of going to hell. But now, you realize that nothing actually changed. You still struggle with doing things your way. Or perhaps you simply feel the deep void and hear the Spirit whispering in your heart.

The Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved" (Acts 16:30). The answer given seems simple: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (v. 31). Jesus also gave an answer: "Repent and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15). To be saved, we are to first *repent*. Most people think that the word means "to change one's ways." However, the word really means "to change one's *mind*." In other words, "Change the way you have been thinking about what you have been thinking." We are to change how we think about Jesus. "Oh, He was a great man, a great

leader, a great teacher, maybe even a prophet.” No. The Bible says He is the very Son of God, God incarnate. The Bible says He died for our sins and rose from the dead on the third day. As God, He deserves our worship, obedience, indeed our entire life. We also must change the way we think about ourselves. We are not “good.” We were born into sin and live a life of self-centeredness — no matter how it is disguised as “good.” We could never be good enough to merit anything other than the state we are in — eternal separation from God.

When we abandon our old way of thinking, then, we must *believe* in the Lord Jesus. In the Bible that word is a synonym for *trust* or *faith*. We are to place our faith [full confidence or trust] in Christ. We admit that we are nothing. We are sinners living a selfish life and are separated from everything good and holy. We believe that He died to reconcile us (bring us back) to God. We admit our need of Him, not only for the life to come, but also for *this life*. We turn over all that we are to Him.

Even the thief on the cross did this. He said to the other thief who mocked Jesus,

“Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:40-42).

Notice what the thief proclaimed:

- *We are the guilty ones.*
- *He is innocent.*
- *He is coming into a kingdom.*

The thief didn't ask to be saved from execution. He entrusted his very life to Jesus, just as Christ committed His life to the Father's hands (v. 46). In the same way, trusting in Christ means surrendering my life to Him. It is no longer my life, my body. He has bought me with a price—the price of His blood (1 Cor. 6:20). I turn away from my desire to live my life on my terms and embrace His way.

Is it necessary to actively pray to be saved? No. The Lord knows your heart. Is it necessary to say a prayer out loud? No. Again, the Lord knows your heart. The heart is the issue. In general, I dislike scripted prayers because they can shift the focus from the heart to the words. But, if you have never prayed before and have a strong urge to do so, but don't know how, know that prayer is simply a means of communicating with the Heavenly Father. I suggest starting along these lines:

Heavenly Father, I come before You in need of Your mercy and grace. I know that I am a sinner, living selfishly outside of You. I believe that You sent Your Son Jesus to die on the cross for me and that You raised Him from the dead so that I may have life with You, both now and in eternity. I give You all that I am, and ask You to save me, live in me, and change me into the person You have called me to be. I ask this in the name of Jesus, Lord and Savior. Amen.

How Do I Know That I Am Saved?

You can't rely on your feelings. Some feel nothing at all. Some have an intense encounter with the Spirit of

God. The Bible says that we can know for certain that we are saved. What we cling to is His promise: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Acts 2:21). You will learn to hear His Spirit speak to you, both in your heart and through His written Word. You will begin to notice areas of your life change. As you grow closer to the Lord, you will experience the peace and joy that He promises. And you more than likely will have the urge to tell of the change. You are now a disciple of Christ.

What Do I Do Now?

You have begun an amazing journey. It is a journey; we are not called to sit around and just wait for heaven. We are called to love God and others actively, as He changes us into His image. There are no formulas in the disciple’s life, but there are things that the Lord calls each of us to do, out of obedience and love for Him.

Be baptized.

Notice I didn’t say, “Join a church.” When you were saved you became a member of the Church (the worldwide Church, aka the Body of Christ). It consists of all who have trusted in Him, whether Jew or Gentile, regardless of “membership” in a local congregation. Baptism is the first step of following Christ. He told the disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples, *baptizing them*” (Matt. 28:19, emphasis added).

Connect with a local community of believers. There are no lone-ranger believers. We were made to walk the

Narrow Road with others. Find a community that preaches the Gospel, teaches the Bible and loves and serves each other. The structure, music style and order of worship are less important.

Read the Word of God. There is no greater joy than knowing Christ, and the Bible is one of the ways God has given to reveal Him. In addition, the Bible was given to train us in righteousness (i.e., now that I'm a disciple of Christ, what does that look like?) It may be that you have already been doing that – perhaps you grew up in church. If that's not the case (and even if it is), I suggest that you start with John's Gospel. Read a little at a time. Take notes. Don't let it become a "rule" or "have to," rather let it be a "get to." After John's Gospel (perhaps read it a couple times through before moving on), read 1 John, then Galatians. If you are unfamiliar with the Bible, I suggest a modern translation, such as the New Living Translation, English Standard Version or New International Version.

Listen for the Spirit. As you grow, you will learn to hear the Spirit speak to you. Sometimes it comes through our reading of Scripture. Sometimes it comes through hearing a message from someone else. Often it comes simply as the voice in our heart. Step out in faith and obey what you hear.

Above all, refuse the temptation to do it on your own. Submit yourself in dependence to Christ. Will you stumble? Probably, just like a baby stumbles when first learning to walk. But know this for certain: Christ's

grace is always freely available. One who falls never needs to “earn” his way back into God’s favor. One only need confess that the attitude of his heart was wrong and repent.

Know that you are not alone on this journey. There are others running the race with you. And Christ is always yours. The greatest prayer that I or anyone could pray for you is Paul’s prayer for the Ephesian believers in Ephesians 3:14-21 (NIV).

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Appendix:

Psalm 51--David's Example of Change

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise (Psalm 51:1-17).

As a closing thought, we are going to look at a Psalm that is very familiar to most who have read the Bible for any length of time. Along with many other Psalms, David is the author of Psalm 51. If you read this

Psalm in your Bible, you will probably see a heading that gives the context: “To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.” The events referred to here can be found in 2 Samuel 11:1-12:15. This Psalm, then, represents David’s confession and repentance. Not only do we get a look into the heart of the King, but we learn a lot about the true nature of sin, repentance, and sin.

The Context (2 Sam. 11:1-12:15)

We’re told in 2 Samuel 11 that, “In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab [the commander of the army]. . . . But David remained at Jerusalem” (v. 1). Some have made much of this opening statement, finding fault in David. The text gives few clues. In 2 Sam. 21:17, David was almost killed, and his men persuaded him to discontinue leading the army. Whether David *should have* gone with the army at this time is debatable.

In any case, he was walking around on the roof of the palace one day and he saw a woman bathing. The text indicates in verse 4 that she was purifying herself from uncleanness — the nature of which is not revealed. She thus would not have been thought immodest in doing so.⁵³ He calls his servants and asks about her, and her identity is made known to him: “Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite” (v. 3). She was, according to Scripture, very beautiful. So, by royal command, she is brought to the king, and he lay

⁵³ The rendering of the KJV, “washing herself” is inadequate, and leaves much room for misinterpretation. Nowhere in the text is there a suggestion that Bathsheba was at fault for the events.

with her. There is no suggestion that she was either willing or unwilling. She had, after all, been summoned by the King.

As if the act itself was not bad enough, David realized he had a problem when she sent word to him: "I am pregnant" (v. 5). So, he devises a plan. He calls Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, home from the war. His plan is to entice Uriah to lay with Bathsheba, so that the child would be thought to be Uriah's – and thus hide David's sin (vv. 8-13).

Uriah, however, is too honorable for that. He refuses such comfort and pleasure while his colleagues are enduring the hardships of war. Even when drunk (at David's instigation), he refuses to go to his wife. David's plan is not working.

David then turns desperate. He arranges for Uriah to be killed, supposedly as part of the fighting (vv. 14-21). In reality, Uriah had been murdered, and not only Joab but ultimately David (having given the order) was responsible. David then takes Bathsheba as his wife (vv. 26-27). Then the writer makes one single comment that changes everything: "But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord."

The Lord sends the prophet Nathan to David, who tells the King a story about a rich man taking advantage of a poor man and showing no compassion. David's anger grows hot against the rich man and pronounces judgement (2 Sam. 12:1-6). A seemingly innocent story. However, Nathan tells David, "You are that man" (v. 7). He then proceeds to tell the word of the Lord to David. The Lord reminded David that he had been given so much:

I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul. I gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your arms and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah (vv. 7-8).

And then the Lord reminds David of one more thing: *And if this were too little, I would add to you as much more.* You can almost hear the Lord saying, “David, if that weren’t enough, all you had to do was ask Me!”

Instead, David took matters into his own hands. He did it his own way – which is the true nature of sin, to get what we want and need apart from God. Adultery, deceit and murder are bad enough. But they spring from a heart determined to live life on its terms rather than God’s. Fortunately for David, however, he repented. And that is where this Psalm comes in.

Introduction: A Plea for Mercy (vv. 1-2)⁵⁴

David begins this Psalm in a simple and direct manner: “Have mercy on me, O God. . . . Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!” You can almost see David falling on his face before the Lord and crying out. His cry in these two verses serves as an introduction to the entire Psalm. Notice the reason given for why the Lord should hear David’s cry: “. . . according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy.” David is saying, “Not on my account Lord, but because of who You are. You are merciful and gracious, full of steadfast love.” If you turn to Exodus 34:6-8, you’ll see this is precisely how the Lord describes Himself.

⁵⁴ The material in this and the following sections is adapted from a blog post on *The Shepherd’s Voice* blog, 9/4/19. <https://voiceshepherd.home.blog>.

The Confession of Sin (vv. 3-6)

Having made his cry, David now confesses his sin before the Lord. Notice that he does not name the particular sins. He does not say, "I committed adultery; I committed murder." The reasons for this are twofold. First, both David and the Lord knew of what he was repenting. Second, as we'll see, the sin of which David is guilty goes farther than just the outward manifestations. Let's take a closer look at what we learn from his words.

- All sin is ultimately against God (v. 4). While sin can be against a person (in terms of actions or words), all sin is fundamentally an affront to God, a statement of, "I'm going to live life my own way." One implication of this is that all sin is relational in nature. Sin damages relationships--with others and God.
- Sin is a product not only of choice but of nature (v. 5). Here, David admits that he was born into sin. Every person born, except for Adam, Eve, and Jesus, was born with a sinful heart that delights in living life independently of God. A child does not have to be taught, "No!" or "I'll do it myself." Both are instinctive.
- Sin extends to the very center of our being (v. 6). Notice that the Lord delights "in truth in the inward being." It's not enough to avoid outwardly sinful behaviors yet be filled with sinful attitudes in the heart. It's in those hidden or secret places that the Lord longs to teach us wisdom, and that wisdom will be shown in our actions.

The Plea for Cleansing and Forgiveness (vv. 7-12)

After his confession, David now turns to his plea. He pleads with the Lord to "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow" (v. 7). To put this in context, many of the cleansing rituals of the Old Testament called for the priest to dip a hyssop branch in the blood of a sacrificed animal and sprinkle or smear it on the item to be cleansed. As Hebrews reminds us, "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Heb. 9:22). Likewise, we are told that the blood of Christ cleanses us from sin today (1 John 1:7).

In verse 8, then, David implies that, because of his sin, he is in a state of depression and brokenness. His cry can be read as, "After You have cleansed and forgiven me, I'll again be able to know Your joy and gladness." He acknowledges that God chastens His children for their sin ("the bones that You have broken"), and calls on the Lord to allow those broken bones to rejoice because of God's faithfulness and mercy. Notice that David asks for complete forgiveness; he throws himself literally on the mercy of God. He pleads for God to do away with his sin (v. 9). We know that, because of Christ's death, the Lord is able to do just that.

After praying for cleansing, David prays that God would restore him. Restore what? He asks for a "clean heart" and a "right spirit" (v. 10). He is asking for the ability to obey God. He wants a heart and spirit inclined to God's ways. God did judge David as "a man after my own heart who will do all my will" (Acts 13:22). We can say, then, that the Lord was with David

David seems to agree with that in verse 11, when

he acknowledges that the Holy Spirit is with him and helps him. This verse may cause confusion for those of us today if we are not careful. We must remember that, under the Old Covenant, the Spirit was said to be "upon" people, but not in them. We, however, have the Spirit of God indwelling us. The two types of relationships can't be compared. David's call for God to "restore to me the joy of Your salvation" (v. 12) reminds us that salvation is God's. He is the Author and Perfecter of salvation

The Sacrifices of Praise (vv. 13-17)

Because of God's love and mercy, David commits to "teach transgressors your ways," so that "sinners will return to you" (v. 13). David is saying that he will remind people of God's mercy and grace, which he has experienced. We can only make God known to the extent that we have experienced Him in a personal way. We can only know His grace when we see how much we need it. We can only know His comfort when we truly need it.

In praying that the Lord would open his lips (v. 14), David reminds us that even our very praise comes from the Lord. He has made us to worship Him. It really is all about Him, not us. The sacrifices that please God, David says, are grateful praise and "a broken and contrite heart" (v. 17). Brokenness before God should be the norm for one who walks with God. We find God most clearly in the brokenness of life. When we do though, we will know how to sing these lines and truly mean it:

*Bind up these broken bones
Mercy bend and breathe me back to life
But not before You show me how to die*
-- "Show Me," Audrey Assad

Takeaways from This Psalm

- True confession of and repentance from sin must start with the heart. It's not enough just to say, "Oh, I lied." The lie grew from an attitude in my heart.
- All sin is firstly against a holy and just God, who desires that we be in fellowship with Him.
- All sin is relational in nature. In order to understand that, sin must no longer be defined as the superficial acts and thoughts that are easy to see.
- When we encounter God in brokenness over our sin, we can be sure He is faithful to forgive, cleanse and restore us. There is no sin that puts us too far from His reach. There is no sin that He will not forgive if we turn to Him in dependence and trust.

Psalm 51 stands as a model for us to see what it means to truly confess and repent of sin – the kind of repentance that cuts to our very heart and soul and frees us to love God and serve others.

NOTE TO THE READER

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