

# **NO OTHER GOSPEL**

## **Living Life God's Way**

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JPT BOOKS

No Other Gospel: Living Life God's Way  
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# Dedication

This book is dedicated

To those who have never given up on me:

My parents, Mitchell and Katie Sue

My Bride, Rosa

To those whom the Savior will never give up on:

The rejected

The wounded

The heavy-laden

To the One who makes *all* things possible, who forgives, saves and heals, no matter where we find ourselves in life, who gave everything He had to prove His love for a lost and dying world.

**Jesus. Savior. Lord**  
**To Him be the glory alone.**



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## Preface to the 10th Anniversary Edition

August of 2014 began what I call my “serious” writing time. Before then I had written in various formats over the years, including some unfinished book ideas, blogs, poems, and a few Bible studies which I was privileged to write and teach. Writing has always been an outlet of mine; I’ve often said that I’m a better writer than speaker (my previous history as a debater notwithstanding). Whether that is true depends on who you ask and is ultimately not mine to judge.

*No Other Gospel*, then, represents my first “serious” attempt at a book. It was written in a time when I myself was struggling with the message of the gospel—not believing it but *understanding* it. For a long time, I believed that one was saved by grace but kept by works. Oh, I never expressed that explicitly, but it was evident in how I lived my life, and why I lacked consistent growth in my relationship with Jesus. As I wrote in a preface to a later book<sup>1</sup>, some may discount the message of this book because of the author’s lack of credentials—no seminary degree, not even a “professional” writer. Both of those statements are true. Some may simply dismiss the message of this book because they know the

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<sup>1</sup> *From Blessed to Transformed: Embracing the Way of the Cross* (JPT Books, 2018, republished 2025), ix.

author and his failings and failures. To them I appeal not to any redeeming quality of my own, but simply to that of which I write: the power of the Cross. Jesus came to call those who know they are sinners, not those who have no need of a physician (Luke 5:32).

It has now been ten years since *No Other Gospel* was first published. Much has transpired since, both in my own personal life and in the world. The American church, in my opinion, is now at a crossroads. The question to answer is this: *Will we continue down the same path of a false gospel, seeking political over spiritual power, or will we turn to the power of the cross and live as Jesus intended us?* I have written extensively on these subjects and won't try to duplicate those ideas here.<sup>2</sup> I will simply say that I believe the time is now for the church to turn back to the true gospel of Jesus.

## LOOKING BACK

It's also time to reflect a little on what I've learned in the last ten years. My theology has certainly not changed or shifted. If anything, my belief in the gospel has only grown and deepened. The most fundamental thing I have learned about the gospel is that *it's bigger than it's often presented*.

The gospel is more than just one's ticket to heaven (or "fire insurance" as some put it). The gospel of Jesus not only has an urgent claim on the life of every man,

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<sup>2</sup> For three examples, see "Christian or American?", posted Jan. 12, 2021, <https://thegospeltoday.online/christian-or-american/>, "Who Are We? (Christian or American Pt. 2)", posted Jan. 19, 2021, <https://thegospeltoday.online/who-are-we-christian-or-american-pt-2/>, and "God's Path or Man's Party", posted Nov. 8, 2021, <https://thegospeltoday.online/gods-path-or-mans-party/>.



woman, and child, but it claims *all of every man, woman, and child*. The gospel is not about getting a ticket to heaven and then going merrily on one's way, living however he or she chooses. At its core, the gospel of Jesus is about *transformation*—changing a rebel, one hostile to God into a worshiper of God. This means that within the gospel lies everything needed for a person to change, grow, and become more like Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

Another thing that stands out, particularly in the last five years, is the need for community. When Jesus saves a person, he or she is saved into the Body of Christ, the Church. We were created for community because of at least two reasons:

- First, *community images God*. God exists in three eternal Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who live in an Eternal Community. When God said, “Let *us* make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness” (Gen. 1:26, emphasis added), part of that image is the idea of community. There is much research out there that confirms the importance Scripture places on community.
- Second, *community is the space in which the gospel is lived out*. The gospel is not about acquiring theological knowledge to puff ourselves up. What is presented in Scripture is given so that we may be transformed into the image of Christ. We learn how to live out the gospel in the midst of community. How else are we to learn (really learn) to forgive if

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<sup>3</sup> A theology of biblical change is presented in my blog series “Toward Christ”, the first of which is found here: <https://thegospeltoday.online/toward-christ-on-the-road-to-growth-and-change/>. The series was inspired by the book I wrote, *Keys to the Kingdom* (JPT books, 2019). The book is available at <https://thegospeltoday.online/jptbooks/>.

we are not in community? How else are we to learn to submit except in community? Those and other concepts are practically meaningless outside of community.

Finally, in discussing the things of God, I have learned the importance of being clear where Scripture is clear, silent (or at least charitable and gracious) where Scripture is silent, and radically countercultural where Scripture is radically countercultural. When learning what the gospel of Jesus is and is not, it hasn't always been easy to keep those tensions together.

## UPDATES TO THE ORIGINAL

In terms of the content, this edition is largely the same; some language has been updated, and the book has been reformatted, using a larger typeface than the original edition. In addition, the footnotes that were used for Scripture reference alone have been converted to in-text citations (any additional information in the original footnote remains in a footnote). The original Appendix A ("The New Testament and the Law") has been moved to a page on my website; it can be accessed here: <https://thegospeltoday.online/go/law-and-grace>. Any other significant changes from the original edition will be noted in footnotes.

This book is summarized by the following encounter with the Lord, the encounter that sparked the writing of this book in the first place. No one should think me super-spiritual for including it, only honest in

admitting my own failings — the warning was first given to me before others.

*My people have turned from Me and My way. They walk according to the flesh, not the Spirit.*

How do they walk according to the flesh?

*They think that by their acts they will incur My blessing. Yet they have placed themselves under a curse. "Whoever does not obey the whole Book of the Law is cursed." Therefore, as they do right, they will be blessed. As they do evil, they will be cursed.*

What is Your Way, Lord?

*My way is a walk by faith. It requires that you trust only in Me as the source of your righteousness. It requires that you trust Me as the source of all goodness. It requires that, though you may not understand the things you go through, you trust that I am good and I have good plans for you. It requires that you set aside ANY attempt at self-righteousness or comparing yourself to another. It requires that you follow where I lead, giving no thought to yourself. It requires that you let Me be the judge of others in matters of faith and sin. It requires that you acknowledge Me and Me alone as the source of faith, justification, and sanctification. Your own attempts at self-righteousness are as filthy rags.*



# Two Ways to Live: A Parable

*A business owner needed workers for a construction project. Early in the morning, around 6 AM, he went to the local gathering spot where day laborers waited for work. He hired several workers, agreeing to pay them \$200 for the day's work, and they headed to the job site. Around 9 AM, the owner drove back to town and saw more people standing around looking for work. "Come work on my project," he told them, "and I'll pay you fairly." So they joined the crew.*

*He did the same thing at noon, at 3 PM, and even at 5 PM when the workday was almost over. Each time he found people waiting for jobs and hired them.*

*When the workday ended at 6 PM, the owner called everyone together to get paid. He started with those who had worked just one hour, giving each of them \$200. When the workers who had been there since early morning saw this, they got excited, figuring they'd get much more since they'd worked all day.*

*But when their turn came, they also received \$200. They started complaining to the owner: "Hold on – these people only worked an hour, and we've been working since sunrise in the hot sun. How is it fair that you're paying us the same amount?"*

*The owner replied to one of them, "Friend, I'm not being unfair. You agreed to work for \$200, right? Take your pay and go. I choose to give the last workers the same as you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my money? Or are you jealous because I'm generous?"<sup>4</sup>*

There are many lessons that can be taken from this parable, but one of the most striking lessons is this: The workers lived by two different sets of norms. The first

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<sup>4</sup> This parable is adapted from the parable of the vineyard owner, found in Matthew 20:1-16.

group, those hired first, negotiated with the owner for a sum of money. They would work the day, and he would pay them their wages. The other group, those who were hired throughout the day, agreed to work for the owner and he would pay them whatever he thought was right. The contrast could hardly be more stark.

These two ways to live comprise the same choice we have today: Will we keep our relationship with God transactional, seeing God as only a business owner and giving us only what we deserve (whatever we and He agree on)? Or, will we serve Him, not because He's "the boss", but because of what He has done for us and allow Him to give us what He determines is right and fair? Do we trust His character enough to choose the latter option? Sadly, many Christians live in the reality that answers that question with a "no!"

There is more to life than this, though. More to life than following the rules so that we can get what we think we deserve. The cross of Christ calls us to more than settling for blessings in this life and protecting ourselves from pain. It calls us to a journey that has hills, valleys, twists, and turns—and where we often see the Lord the clearest when in the dark valleys. The final point of the parable above, the one that Jesus made when He told it? *It is those who allow the Lord to live in and through them, no matter the circumstances, who will be first, even though they seem to be "last" here. They will surrender their "rights" to the Lord and allow Him to determine their reward and destiny.*

This is the gospel of Jesus, and this is the life He has called us to live.

## Introduction

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8). So stands Paul's statement to the churches of Galatia. As you read in Scripture, you may think that Paul was able to put the controversy to rest. But, no. History shows us otherwise. That "other gospel" is alive and well in the modern church. "Hold on just a minute," you may object. "I believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and so does my church! What is this so called 'other gospel' you're talking about?" Good question!

First though, let's understand the situation 2,000 years ago in Galatia. Paul was missionary to these churches, having been sent from Antioch, along with Barnabas. According to his own letter, the Galatians received him warmly. To put it in modern American terms, they would have given him the shirt off their backs. His work there was so successful that it drew the focus of the Judaizers. This was a group of "Christians" that insisted on keeping the laws and customs taught by Moses. In essence, they taught, "Unless you are circumcised, you cannot be saved." This of course brought Paul into sharp debate with them. He taught that faith alone was the only requirement for salvation, that works had no part in it (Acts 15:1).

So, it seems that Paul and Barnabas, along with others, traveled to Jerusalem to see the elders about this matter. There was much debate on the matter. But Peter settled the question when he made the logical argument that since God gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles in the same way He did for the Jews, He was not requiring that they (in essence) become Jewish. Peter concludes by stating,

Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will. (Acts 15:10-11)

He swayed the Council including James, who summarized the consensus: “[W]e should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood” (Acts 15:19-20).<sup>5</sup> The Gentiles were thus free to turn to God, serving Him in clean faith.

“Well, then, there you go! The Council settled the matter once and for all, right?” Not quite so fast. If the matter had been settled, why did the Church “re-invent” the heresy, with things like penance, purgatory and other such works? Why does the modern Western Church insist so much that to be a “good Christian” you have to read your Bible, pray, witness, and try your best to follow the Ten Commandments? Why do some today teach that

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<sup>5</sup> Most of the prohibitions James gives here were given before the Law of Moses and thus applied to all mankind. Specifically, the last two (eating meat that had been strangled or with blood in it) had been given by God before the Flood.



we are “saved by grace but kept by works”? And why do we see the absolute lack of authenticity in Christians today?

The answer to those questions is simple: Having lost the battle at Jerusalem, the enemy changed his tactics slightly and revamped his message, “Christianizing” it. Now, instead of making the Gentiles become Jews, he simply wants us to become “better” Christians. Doesn’t sound so bad, does it? I mean, who *doesn’t* want to be “better”?

But is that all we can expect to get out of this life? To “better” ourselves? Is that what faith is really about? I suggest that it is not. Christ did not call us to simply “do better”, or even “be better Christians.” He calls us to walk with Him in faith, becoming like Him, who was fully human. Will we fail at times on that journey? Most likely. Will He be there to pick us up and dust us off and encourage us to keep walking with Him? Absolutely!

### **What This Book is Not**

This is not a “self-help” book. We cannot “help” ourselves become better Christians, no matter how hard we try. As we’ll discuss later, the work of sanctification (becoming like Christ) is God’s work in us.

This is not a “Seven Steps (or eight, or ten, or....)” book. You’ll find no system in here to “work.” That is absolutely contrary to the nature of faith.

This is not a “get faith, get rich, healthy, or otherwise comfortable” book. Again, that is not the true nature of faith.

## What This Book Is

This book is a call to return to true biblical faith. The faith that says, “No matter what, I trust Him.” The kind of faith that says, “Lord, I’m no longer worthy to be called your son,” and watch Him put a robe on us and a ring on our finger. It is a call to step out of the boat, into the unknown, believing that, even if we drown, *He is still good*.

This book is a wake-up call to the Bride of Christ, to remind her that Christ wants all of her, not just the Bible time, the money, and a few minutes each day telling Him what we want. It is a reminder that *any* attempt at self-righteousness is as filthy rags in His sight. And why would the Bride of Christ want to wear filthy rags, when there’s been a spotless wedding gown prepared for her?

This book is also a re-telling of my own journey through this subject. Make no mistake. I have not arrived. Such is the nature of faith. No matter how much you know, there is still more that you don’t know. Though I will share parts of my story, please don’t miss the point. The point is not about me or where I’ve come or what I’ve learned. The journey of faith is a personal journey, and it is one that can only be learned by...well...walking in faith. No book can adequately communicate the mystery of faith. The best that an author can hope for (if he or she is honest) on this subject is to establish some broad guidelines according to the Word of God. Faith is a mystery, plain and simple.

Most of all, this book is a book of Hope. It is a call to focus on Christ as our Hope, no matter what the circumstance, not matter what the consequence. It is a reminder to those of us who honestly struggle with faith

that God sees us, hears our cry, and knows our pain. It is a reminder that the same God who calls us to be holy paid the ultimate price so that He could make us holy. He is good, and He has a good plan for each of us, for His glory and His alone.



# 1 Two Worlds Collide

The Bible speaks of two different realms – the realm of law, sin and death and the realm of faith. God has always operated in the realm of faith, even during Old Testament times. We read in Genesis that “Abram believed the LORD, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6).<sup>6</sup> Now, you may be thinking, “I know I’m not under the law, but under grace.” If that’s the case, you’ll have no trouble reading the rest of this chapter. This chapter is a closer look at those two systems, sort of a context or framework for the rest of this message.

## THE LAW OF SIN AND DEATH

“For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. . . . The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 3:23, 6:23). These two statements are an accurate summary of this realm of living. Simply put, the wages of sin is death. It is significant that Paul used that word. In context, Paul is saying, “This is what you get when you sin – death,” much like accumulating a paycheck when you work (though few of us would care to get that type of paycheck).

The principle of law, sin and death (as contrasted with faith and life) stretches all the way back to the Garden of Eden (though the “Law” as we know it was

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<sup>6</sup> The context is that of God promising a son to Abram. That promise would not come to pass for many years, but Abram would hold fast to that promise.

not given until thousands of years later). We read in Genesis 2:15-17,

*The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."*

Of all the things we can glean from this passage, only one thing is important for our discussion here: God gave Adam a specific command: *Do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil*. That's it. Just don't do it. He also told Adam what would happen if he violated that command – death (hence, the wages of sin).

Now Adam had a choice. Here's what God was really asking of Adam, "Either walk in the realm of law, with the appropriate price, trying to provide for your own needs, not trusting in My goodness, or walk in the realm of faith, trusting what I say, trusting that I am good, trusting that I will provide everything you need." If you know anything about the Bible, you know what choice Adam made. He chose to disbelieve God and give in to the lie of the serpent: "You can be like God and do things your own way" (Gen. 3:4-5, author's paraphrase).

Unfortunately for the rest of us, Adam, as our representative, made the choice for all of us. "Not fair," you say? Perhaps not, but consider this: If Adam, a perfect man in a perfect environment gave into the temptation, dare any of us think we could have done better? It is the nature of humanity to "make it on our

own.” In any case, Adam placed himself (and yes, all of us) in that realm of “law, sin and death.”

What does this realm look like? Since, in every realm, there exist principles that govern life in the realm, we will describe this “realm” in terms of the principles. Here are the principles that govern this realm. We will discuss each in turn:

- \* *The knowledge of the law arouses sinful desires.*
- \* *Humans are unable, in themselves, to fulfill the demands of the law.*
- \* *The law demands perfection – both inwardly and externally.*
- \* *The law always gives what is deserved. No more, no less.*
- \* *The law can only bring death, not life.*
- \* *The law has authority over a person as long as he or she lives.*

1) *The knowledge of the law arouses sinful desires.*

This first principle is pretty simple to understand: Tell a child “Don’t go in there,” or “don’t do that”, and what does he immediately want to do? Exactly what you told him not to do! Paul talks about this very principle in his own struggles with the law and righteousness.<sup>7</sup>

2) *Humans are unable, in themselves, to fulfill the law’s demands.*

As mentioned earlier, Adam, the only other perfect man besides Jesus to walk the earth could not, in himself, make the correct choice and meet the law’s demands. Paul himself writes of his own struggle

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<sup>7</sup> See Romans 7:7-9. Note that Paul does not call the law sin. He emphatically calls the law holy, good and just.

between his righteous desires and sinful desires.<sup>8</sup> Personally, if those two can't make it, I often wonder, "What chance do I have?" (Fortunately, as we'll talk about later, that is not the end of the story!)

3) *The law demands perfection – both inwardly and externally.*

Since, as humans, we cannot hope, by our own strength, to carry out the law's demands, this principle should give us pause. Perfection. That's the standard. Nothing less. Many people, when describing the difference between the Old and New Testaments, portray the mistaken idea that "the Old Testament is about external works, and the New Testament is about inward heart attitudes." That's not quite correct. The God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of the New Testament, and His standards don't change. When Jesus taught about the law in the Sermon on the Mount, He wasn't so much raising the standard as He was properly explaining it. God has always been concerned with the inner attitude and heart of man. That is why Jesus quoted the Greatest Commandment as "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength." The Law reaches to every part of a person.

Imagine taking a test, where the pass mark is 100%. You study and study and study. You give up time with your friends to study. You think through

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<sup>8</sup> See Romans 7:14-23. While there is debate among Bible scholars as to whether Paul is describing a condition before or after his salvation, the principles still remain the same. We know that even Christians often struggle to do what is right.



every question carefully. You did your absolute best. You know of nothing else you could have done. When the grades are returned, you are shocked to discover that you made the highest grade in the class – a 99%. You failed the test. That’s the way the law is. It doesn’t judge by comparing people. It sets an absolute, unyielding standard. You failed, not because you didn’t do your best, but simply because you fell short of the standard.

Scripture is clear on the same point: “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it” (James 2:10-13).<sup>9</sup> Many of the New Testament writers echo this same point in various ways. Jesus urged, “Be perfect, even as your Heavenly Father is perfect.” Peter quoted the Old Testament in saying, “Be holy, as I am holy.” In each of these, the context is directed toward inward purity, not just outward “works.”<sup>10</sup>

*4) The law always gives what is deserved – Nothing more or less.*

In the Old Testament, the Lord promised Israel that if they obeyed Him, they would be blessed and protected. If they turned away and served other gods, they would be cursed and taken from the land (and sadly, this came to pass). “What about the sacrifices,” you ask? Good question. The sacrifices were actually God’s acts of grace and mercy. Even though they are

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<sup>9</sup> James is not making the point that adultery is the same as murder or any other sin. Rather, he is simply making the point that if you fail at one point in the law, you are therefore not perfect.

<sup>10</sup> See Matthew 5:43-48, 1 Peter 1:14-16

considered “the Law”, it was something He allowed out of His great love. He didn’t *have* to institute that system. He could have easily let the people struggle under the law, getting what they deserved – blessing for obedience, curses for disobedience.

But, because He is a “gracious and merciful God” (as He described Himself in Exodus 34:6-8), He instituted the sacrifice, whereby man could be “redeemed” and his sin covered by the shedding of innocent blood. All the people had to do was obey. This in itself was an act of faith, because, as Jesus pointed out, it’s easy to say “your sins are forgiven”, but we don’t see the results. How do we really know that God is keeping His Word? That is where faith comes in.

*5) The law can only bring death, not life.*

The law only promises two things: blessings and curses. Those are for this life. It cannot give eternal life. Why? Because, “the righteous shall live by faith” (Rom. 1:17). And remember Abraham? He was justified by faith, not law. As Paul summarized, “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. . . . if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law” (Rom. 3:20, Gal. 2:22).

*6) The law has authority over a person as long as he or she lives.*

This is a basic principle of any system of law. The law only exerts authority over a person as long as they are alive. Paul points out that a man who dies is

released from the law. So, if a woman remarries after her husband dies, she is not an adulteress (Rom. 7:1-3). Often when a person who owes money dies, the claims are cancelled.<sup>11</sup> So we won't get ahead of ourselves, we will set aside the implications of this principle until later. For now, it is only necessary to remember this one statement: "It is appointed once for man to die, then the Judgment" (Heb. 9:27).

*Conclusion: What is this realm like?*

The realm of law is a land where you "do it yourself." It is much like the pioneers of old in the newly forming United States. They worked hard, and they deserved what they got. It was a hard life. Yet they had only their hard work to point to. Living in this realm, one must be on constant guard, lest he violate even the smallest letter of the law (let alone the spirit or intent of the law!) It is an easy-to-define realm, with clear rules and consequences — and death in the end.

## **THE REALM OF FAITH**

Now we turn our attention to the realm of faith. Trying to define this realm is a little like trying to catch the wind. It's not as easy to quantify. And that is necessarily the case, for it would not be faith. It is also wise to point out that we are talking about true Biblical faith. Many people talk about "having faith", but they are talking about faith in general: "You just have to have faith!" Faith in who or what? What is our basis for

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<sup>11</sup> Of course, if the creditors have a valid claim against the "estate" of a dead person that is a different matter—but that is not relevant to the discussion at hand.

faith? So, with those thoughts in mind, we will take a look at the key principles that govern this realm.

*\* Biblical faith always has the God of the Bible as its object.*

*\* Biblical faith is rooted in the character of God.*

*\* Biblical faith is submitted to the will of God.*

That's it. Just three eternal principles. If you were expecting a long list like you read earlier about law, sorry to disappoint you. But as we said previously, that is the nature of faith.

*1) Biblical faith always has the God of the Bible as its object.*

This statement should be self-explanatory. We do not place our faith in the Bible, any earthly person, but only in God as He is revealed in Scripture. Faith must always have an object. If you say, "You just need to have faith," I ask again, "Why must I have faith?" Just because it makes the world a "better place"? If that faith is empty and has no basis in reality, that's bordering on, if not outright, self-deception. God does not call us to live in fantasy. He calls us to live in a reality that is anchored in Him.

In truth, each of us lives every day by faith. If we did not believe a chair would hold us, we would not sit in it. If we did not believe that the upcoming traffic light was working, or that cars would stop at the red light, we would not dare cross the intersection. And, if we do not believe that God is all that He says He is, we will be hesitant to trust His guidance. That is the bottom line of faith.

## 2) *Biblical faith is rooted in the character of God.*

What does this statement mean? It means that we believe and expect certain things about God, based on His character. Faith is not rooted in His promises. Jesus did not say, “Believe in My promises.” He said, “Believe Me.” The promises both flow out of, and are the evidence of, His character. Abraham believed that God was faithful. And thus, when God said, “Go to a land that I’ll show you,” He did so.

This, then, leads to a very important observation about our journey of faith. *Your level of faith is directly related to how much you know about the character of God.* If you know little, you will believe little. If you know much, you can believe much. As Neil Anderson has pointed out, to try to push yourself beyond that line (where your “belief” is not based on what you know of God) is stepping into the world of fantasy.<sup>12</sup> And that is why reading and study of the Word, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is so very important.

## 3) *Biblical faith is submitted to the will of God.*

Just as faith is rooted in the character of God, it is also submitted to His will. What does that mean? It means that, while I believe that God is who He says, I also know that I do not have all knowledge. I am not able to understand His will at times for my life. Again, without getting ahead of ourselves, it’s wise to remember how Jesus taught His disciples to pray:

*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have*

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<sup>12</sup> Anderson, *Victory*, e-book, Chapter 6

*forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. (Matt. 6:9-13)*

Everything that we are to pray for comes after we submit to His will. And that is not just lip-service. It is true submission. James agrees with this, when he writes, “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). Even Jesus, God-in-the-flesh, did this. In the Garden of Gethsemane, He prayed, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what You will” (Mark 14:36).<sup>13</sup>

The will of God in matters of faith is one of the key principles that is either overlooked or misunderstood. We typically go to one of two extremes. We either claim that we can have “whatever we ask in His name”, regardless of the thing being asked, or we pray wimpy prayers, using the excuse that “maybe that’s not His will,” or “If it’s Your will, please let so and so happen.” Neither of those is correct. I believe that both are true. We are to pray in faith, according to the character of God and our standing before Him as His sons and daughters. But, we must also submit ourselves (not our requests, but ourselves) to His will and understand that sometimes He has a better plan for our lives, one that we cannot see. Most of all, we should pray that our will is transformed into His will.

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<sup>13</sup> Of course, we cannot say that Jesus did not understand the Father’s will for His life. Jesus plainly stated it on a number of occasions. In His humanity, however, He took no pleasure in it. Yet His submission and devotion to the Father’s will enabled Him to pray the second half of that prayer.

*Conclusion: What is this realm like?*

Walking in the first realm is relatively easy and safe. You know what the rules are, you know what to expect. You can do things to protect yourself from the curses, or bad stuff. Living by faith—true faith—is not quite so easy. It is a land of unknown. It requires that moment by moment, step by step, you follow God as he leads you. Wherever that may be—on a mountaintop, into a valley, down into the deepest pits, through oceans that would drown you. The one thing that this realm has going for it—and this outweighs everything else—is that it is the realm of *life*. God has provided every blessing we need here in this realm (even blessings we don't anticipate). Yes, there is a cost to walking by faith—Jesus did say, “Consider the cost.” But the rewards, He says, are worth it.

One final point about those two realms is in order: *God will let you choose which realm you walk in.* You just can't walk in both at the same time. You can walk in the realm of law, sin and death, or you can walk in the realm of the Spirit, faith and life. The choice is yours.





## 2 Something Old, Something New

In this chapter, we are going to take a look at the “particulars” of the law. We will start with that body of Scripture that we call “the Law.” Strictly speaking, this refers to the first five books of the Bible, since these contain the laws that were given by God to Israel. However, “the Law” has often been used in a general sense to refer to the entire Old Testament (which is quite misleading for a number of reasons that we won’t get into here).

### A BREAKDOWN OF THE LAW

Many people find it convenient to talk about several different “types” or “categories” of the Old Testament law: ceremonial, civil, and moral. We will adopt these categories for the sake of convenience, though the Law is not as easy to compartmentalize as that.

1) *The Ceremonial Law* - God gave these laws to Israel as a means of directing their worship and standing before Him, as well as certain aspects of cleanliness. Virtually all Christian churches agree and teach that the Christian is no longer bound to these regulations. Most cite the statements in the New Testament that these laws were

but a foreshadowing of the work of Christ, and the statements by Jesus that all food was clean.<sup>14</sup>

2) *The Civil Law* - The civil laws of the Old Testament were given to a nation that was to be a theocracy – ruled solely by God through His representative. Later, as we know, they asked for a King, “so that we can be like the other nations.” He granted that request, but the king was subject to His decrees. The civil law contained regulations regarding daily living, political affairs, and the judicial system (including crimes and punishments).<sup>15</sup>

Since these laws were clearly given to Israel, and Israel ceased to exist as a nation until reconstituted in 1948, again, virtually all Christian churches conclude that these laws are no longer binding on the church.

3) *The Moral Law* - The Moral Law relates to right and wrong, character and attitudes. It includes, but is not limited to, the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:1-17). Jesus mentioned nine of the Commandments in the new Testament (the only one not mentioned was the Sabbath). This is the category of Law that is most in question when talking about the New Testament’s response to the law (and Jesus’ own teaching on the Law). That God still expects this of His people (and, indeed, of all people) is not in question.

Despite other differences in interpreting the Old Testament Law, it is generally agreed within the Church

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<sup>14</sup> See Col. 2:17, Heb. 10:1, Mark 7:19 (and compare Rom. 14:20).

<sup>15</sup> See for example, Ex. 21:1-23:9; Lev. 19:35; 24:17-23.

that the law does not save (i.e., that salvation is by grace through faith, not by the law). After that discussion, you may be tempted to think that everyone understands now that we are “not under law, but under grace.” And, you *might* be right. But then again, it might surprise you to consider that you might be living under law today. It’s just that the law looks...different.

## THE NEW BOOK OF THE LAW

The law contained principles for living, blessings for obedience, and curses for disobedience. In fact, the Israelites were regularly required to read the blessings and curses from two separate mountains.<sup>16</sup> Remember this principle that governs the realm of law: *The law always gives what is deserved. No more, no less.* In giving the Law, God was essentially saying, “You want to live in that realm? Here are the rules.” This is how you can “do it on your own.” Do the sacrifices, do good, and be blessed. Do evil and expect curses.

Of course, that made it easy for people to know where they stood. The problem was they always stood on the wrong side of the line! And that is because of this principle: *The law demands perfection – both inwardly and externally.* To live under law is to live perfectly or suffer the consequences.

Why is this important? Because, simply put, Christians have a Book of the Law, too. It’s called “the Bible.” “Whoa! The Bible is not about law, it’s a story of God’s redemption and our response to it.” If that is your thought, then you are absolutely right. That certainly

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<sup>16</sup> See Joshua 8:33-35.

seems to have been the overall intent of the Holy Spirit when He inspired the writers. Now, most churches will agree with that statement as well, even as the Bible is taught as a new book of the law. Consider this:

1) The Bible is often taught as a book of “absolute principles for living.” That is to say, “Give and you’ll be given more. If you don’t have, you aren’t giving enough. Train your children right and they’ll grow up right. Live the right way and good things will happen to you.” Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? Very much like the blessings and curses of the Old Covenant.

2) Churches teach almost absolutely that some Old Testament laws are binding on the church. Some examples include the Sabbath (though that’s been conveniently moved to Sunday and spiritualized as a day of rest), tithing (though they rarely pronounce the curses associated with that law – bless the ones for their honesty who do), and food laws (saying the Lord gave those to Israel for health reasons).

3) The “principles of faith” (as some churches call them) are taught as law.<sup>17</sup> Have enough faith, and good things will happen to you. Doubt and see those promises unfulfilled. It is, as I have heard many teach, “Now that you have Jesus, your life will flow naturally and easy. You may not be wealthy [after all, Jesus did teach against accumulating wealth], but you can be comfortable, if you just follow these steps.”

Simply put, many parts of the Church have the mindset that says, “Live right (i.e., by the principles) and be blessed, live outside the principles and be cursed.”

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<sup>17</sup> This is seen in the so called “Blessed Life” movement, also called the prosperity gospel or health and wealth gospel. See my book *From Blessed to Transformed: Embracing the way of the Cross* (JPT Books, 2018) for a discussion of this movement. The book is available here: [thegospeltoday.online/jptbooks/](http://thegospeltoday.online/jptbooks/).

What we have, then, are Christians that depend on Christ for their ticket to heaven, and themselves for their comfort and daily living. Make no mistake, we spiritualize it—after all, faith *is* a major theme of the Bible. But, “have faith in God”, has come to mean “have faith in God that you’ll get what you want. Pray through the hard stuff and have enough faith, and God will deliver you.” So, *live right and be blessed, but don’t live right and be cursed.*

We have fallen prey to the Galatian heresy, which says, “Yes, Jesus can save you, but...” It’s also the same lie that Satan gave Eve in the garden: “You can do it your own way.” His version today, “Okay, it’s great to be saved! Now, live a good life! After all, you’re entitled to it, as a child of the King, right? But make sure you live right, or bad things will happen to you.” Am I oversimplifying matters? Perhaps. But, in the end, that is the bottom line of what much of the church has become.

\* Wrestling with faith has come to mean answering the question, “Why am I not being blessed?” instead of “How can the fruit of the Spirit be grown in me?”

\* We seek rules and principles for living a “good Christian life” rather than seeking God’s Presence. We seek those things because we fear that unknown realm of faith. We fear that realm because we do not truly know God’s character or trust His heart.

\* We want to identify with the Resurrection of Christ, but not His crucifixion. Likewise, we want His spiritual power, but don’t want to pay the price for it.

\* We want to be able to say we contributed something to our growth, when in reality we have NOTHING to contribute.

\* We would rather do the easy things (give our tithes, say our prayers, have faith, go to church) and be blessed materially rather

than do the hard things (love our enemies, wrestle with our flesh, accept persecution as God's tool for our growth) and be blessed eternally. In essence, we want enough faith to move mountains, but not enough faith to withstand the furnace, lion's den, or the cross.

We want the good things, but not His best. We would rather settle for living by a prescribed set of principles than seek His presence in that mysterious realm of faith—where not everything makes sense, and not everything adds up (at least not in this life).

### **“O FOOLISH GALATIANS!”**

I can hear Paul echo those words, should he see the modern church. And foolishness is the correct term. It is foolish because of five main reasons:

First, the law is a whole and cannot be divided. This practice of picking and choosing some Old Testament laws to live by, while discarding others, simply will not do. For to accept one part, Paul says, is to be obligated to keep the whole, and to place oneself under the law is to be removed from grace (Gal. 5:2-4).

Second, anyone who chooses to live according to the law is under a curse: *For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them”* (Gal. 3:10). This truth is something believers conveniently forget. We want the blessings of the law, but none of the curses!

Third, the law demands perfection, inward and outward. No human can accomplish that apart from Christ, until we reach heaven. To choose to live under the

law, then, is to practically invite the curses of the law into our life.

Fourth, since no Gentile was ever required to obey the Old Testament law, to adopt any of them as binding for the Christian is to put God to the test (Acts 15:10). It is saying to Him, “What You did on the cross was not good enough for me. I can do it my own way.”

Finally, and related to the last point, if we could live under the law perfectly, then Christ’s death was meaningless (Gal. 2:21). All we are left with is the death of a man that, at best, a moral example—but an example of what, exactly? Martyrdom? There were many martyrs in Israel’s history—those that paid the ultimate price for their faith. No, Christ’s death had to count for *something*, and that something was us. As I heard in an advertisement for a women’s conference, “My life was worth His death.”<sup>18</sup>

## THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW AND THE WORD

After reading this chapter, I’m sure you have questions: “Are you saying I shouldn’t give? Rest on Sunday? Pray for healing?” The answer to all of those is, “Of course not!” We’ll touch on those questions later. You may also be inclined to think that I am against the law or the Word. Far be it from me! As the Bible itself says, the word of the Lord lasts forever. His judgments are just and right. The obvious question, then, is “What do we do with the Bible?” Let me give an example of the

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<sup>18</sup> For a fuller discussion of what the New Testament says about the law, see <https://thegospeltoday.online/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/law-and-grace.pdf/>.

role that the Bible and the Law play in the life of the believer.

Toward the end of the book “The Giver”, Jonas embarks on a daring mission to cross “the boundary of memories” in an attempt to return the memories and emotions to the people. He goes to the Giver (also known as the “Receiver of Memories”; Jonas is the “Receiver-in-Training”), and explains his plan. The Giver intends to stay behind, in order “to help them.” That is, he will help the people learn to deal with their new freedom. He will teach them how to live in this new realm where everything is not so black-and-white (in the movie version, the entire movie up to this point, save for a few flashes, is in black-and-white).<sup>19</sup>

For the believer, that is the purpose of the Word; to train him, to teach him how to live in this freedom. Yet is not out of “duty to the law” that he obeys. It is a fundamental change in his nature—his very identity—that enables him to do so. Our Giver has set us free to experience life in a whole new way (just as the citizens of the “Community” in *The Giver* got back something that makes all of us innately human). His Word, along with the Holy Spirit, is our guide to living this life. When we seek to live under the law, we are placing ourselves back into that world of “black-and-white.”

The problem is that life is not so “black-and-white.” Now, I’m not talking about right and wrong, moral standards here. I am talking about things that happen in our lives that we perceive as good or bad. The Bible does say we are to be honest, truthful, kind, just, peaceful and loving. We are to be that way, however, because *it is who*

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<sup>19</sup> *The Giver*, directed by Phillip Noyce, The Weinstein Company, 2014, film.



*we are as a believer!* It also does contain general principles that God put in place to help us live. However, God being God, is free at any time to intervene in our lives for His purposes.

In *The Giver*, Jonas was already chosen as the receiver while he was still in that world of black-and-white, living a life of rules and law. Once he was set free, he had to learn how to deal with that new freedom, just as we do when we are set free in Christ – which happens at the moment of salvation. And that, my friend, is the walk of faith.

## **FAITH: BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD**

I know I said in the Introduction that you'll find no "system" in this book. Faith does not operate like that. However, having looked at what faith *is not*, we can at least get a better idea of the nature of biblical faith, by looking at the three principles that govern the realm of faith that were laid out in Chapter 1:

*\* Biblical faith always has the God of the Bible as its object.*

*\* Biblical faith is rooted in the character of God.*

*\* Biblical faith is submitted to the will of God.*

Remember those? It's now time for us to bring those back to the center of our discussion. As we talk about this walk of faith, these will be fundamental concepts on which we will build an understanding. Let's now draw out some implications of these to build on.

1) *Biblical faith always has the God of the Bible as its object.* True faith is always centered on God (and on no one and nothing else). It is not centered on rules, regulations,

blessings, curses. Faith is the means to an end (knowing and experiencing God), never the end in itself. Since faith is what keeps us anchored in the storms of life, our faith had best be rooted in something (Someone) stable!

2) *Biblical faith is rooted in the character of God.* As we mentioned earlier, faith is not rooted in the promises of God, but rather in His character. That fine line is important. Promises mean nothing without character behind them. Remember, the Bible says that Abraham believed God “because he counted Him faithful.” That means that Abraham trusted in God’s character, and thus he could believe what God spoke to him. And as we also mentioned earlier, the level of faith you have is directly proportional to how much you know about that person. Know little of their character, and you can believe little. Know much, and you can believe much.

3) *Biblical faith is submitted to the will of God.* As we mentioned above, faith is not the end—it is the means. Thus, it must be submitted to the end. Jesus knew beyond a shadow of doubt that His Father could remove the cup from Him, could even rescue Him from the cross, and even prayed for deliverance from the cup. Yet, He submitted Himself—and that faith—to the will of God. If it is not submitted to God’s will, rather than faith, it borders on presumption.

Now that we have reconnected with these principles of the faith realm, we can case a vision of what biblical faith looks like. We will do this by examining what they look like in the teachings of Christ. For those

of you looking for a system or a step-by-step guide, let's give you something to focus on. We're going to talk about two questions that need to be answered: 1) *The purpose of faith*; and 2) *The path of faith*. Read on to enter the faith realm.



### 3 The Purpose of Faith

In the last chapter, we introduced the two key questions for navigating the realm of faith. This chapter deals with the first of those questions: *What is the purpose of [my] faith?* And this naturally begs another question: *What is my purpose in life?* There have been many books written on this subject, and it is not the intent or goal of this book to comment on any of them. It is, however, the goal of this book to answer that question simply and definitely.

Perhaps the simplest (and the most famous) answer for this lies in the Westminster Shorter Catechism. It is a series of questions and answers designed to teach the basics of the Christian faith. The first question asks, “What is the chief end of man?” In other words, “What is his purpose? Why was He created?” The answer is simple and direct: “To glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” Two things, both related. Glorify God. Enjoy Him. The rest of this chapter will explore what those two things mean.

#### TO GLORIFY GOD

You were indeed created with a purpose. That purpose, by the way, has nothing to do with you, your own comfort or desires. Man was created by God to bring Him “glory.” Loosely interpreted, that means that all of creation should be able to see what God does in and

through mankind and stand up and say “Wow! How awesome is He!” Notice that there is nothing in that statement about you or me. The focus is exactly where it belongs: on God.

“Now, wait a minute,” you may be thinking, “He lets us be part of that.” He most certainly does—but it still has nothing to do with you. The truth is, He does not need you or me (and some of you may need to read that statement a few times). He graciously allows us to be part of His plans—indeed, He desires that we be part of them, because He wants a relationship with us. In the end, however, it is still all about Him. The most we can honestly say is that we are privileged to be allowed to be part of His works.

The question, then, is “How do we glorify God?” The answer? *By participating willingly in the purposes He has in your life and the lives of others.* Simple answer? It does sound like it. However, it’s not quite as simple as you might think. The difficulty, though, lies in our understanding of His purposes. As an example, let’s take a well-known passage from Scripture:

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. (John 9:1-3).

In this passage, it is quite clear what Jesus taught: The man was born blind so that God might glorify Himself through the man’s healing. That passage poses little difficulty to most of us, since, after all, it does have a happy ending—the man was healed! But, it does highlight the problem that is faced if one takes a position

that all sickness is a result of sin or something “bad.” Let’s look at another passage, a little less well-known:

So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Cor. 12:7-9a)

While the nature of this “thorn in the flesh” has never been exactly determined, many scholars believe that it was some sort of physical problem. I believe Scripture lends credence to that view. The important thing to notice here, though, is that *Paul was not healed of the “thorn”, despite his prayers*. Wait! Didn’t Jesus say that if we have enough faith, we can have anything we ask? Remember the third principle of the faith realm: *Biblical faith is submitted to the will of God*. In this case, God had a clear purpose for Paul’s infirmities – indeed Paul himself testifies that he would glory in his weaknesses “so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Cor. 12:9b).

On a related note, what about all the beatings, persecutions, stoning, and shipwrecks that Paul endured (to say nothing of his death)? Would we dare to say that he did not have enough faith or that he was not living by the right principles? The record in Scripture is clear – all of those things had a purpose beyond his comfort or safety. The short-term purpose, as far as Paul was concerned, was to throw him more fully upon Christ.

We can take similar looks at many lives in Scripture—both in the Old and New Testaments. To highlight a few:

\* Job lost all he had—children, health, possessions. Though God had to make some adjustments to his attitudes, his faith was vindicated in the end. He understood that God’s purposes were not his own—even though he did not understand the purposes themselves.

\* David was anointed king over Israel, then spent years wandering, running from Saul. He endured hardships, danger, and loss of his family. What purpose did all of that serve? It developed the character in him needed to govern the kingdom wisely as God directed.

\* Joseph was sold into slavery, falsely accused of rape, and thrown into prison. Not once did he grumble, complain, or try to argue with God. In the end, he understood that God had a purpose.

I could go on and on, even as Hebrews 11 says. The point remains the same, though. *We often cannot judge God’s purposes for things in our lives until we are able to honestly look back on them.* God’s purposes often have more to do with our character than our comfort. Speaking of character, let’s take a look at Romans 5 for a moment:

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame. (Rom. 5:3-4)

Paul says we can rejoice in our sufferings? Most of us find that hard to believe; we just want to get rid of the suffering and stay as far from it as possible! Yet, God graciously uses everything that comes our way for our



character and His glory (yes, developing our character into His image does indeed bring Him glory).

I do want to point out that I am *not* suggesting that our suffering is the only way He gets glory. That is obviously not the case. I *am* saying, however, that our suffering is the most overlooked way that He is glorified. Instead of trying to pray our way out of it, perhaps we should be asking, “How can I allow You to get glory from this situation?” The point is, the answer to that question is up to Him, not you or me.

Here is the bottom line of this discussion. Jesus said that the greatest commandment was to love the Lord with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength (Mark 12:30). What does that mean? It means that we are to place ourselves on the altar, surrendering all that we are to Him. If He wishes me to use my body to bring Himself glory, whether it be as an athlete or a martyr, then so be it. If He wishes me to use my mind to bring Him glory, either as a well-recognized scholar or a wise counselor to a few friends, then so be it. The decision and choice is His. All we are to do is submit and obey—even if we don’t understand His purposes.

## **TO ENJOY HIM FOREVER**

The second part of the answer to the question “What is my purpose (and thus the purpose of my faith),” is this: *To enjoy Him forever*. What does it mean to enjoy God? Let’s take a human example to illustrate. A man enjoys being with his friends as he spends time with them, they share common interests and often common values. A man enjoys his wife because they share a bond

and he admires qualities in her (that he really should be telling her about! And that's a freebie, guys).

It is much the same way with God. He designed us for relationship—not only with each other, but also with Him. In fact, the Trinity is a community—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They operate in perfect harmony. The Eternal Community decided one day that they wanted to create something new—a creature that could experience that same kind of community. So, we read in Genesis 1:

Then God said, "Let us make man[h] in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." (Gen. 1:26)

Since man was created in His image and after His likeness, that means He was created for community—to be in relationship, both with God and with others of his kind. We also read in Genesis 3 that God was looking for Adam to walk with Him in the cool of the Garden. It suggests that this was a common thing—that they had a relationship. That is the essence of enjoyment. And that is what God calls us to—a life of enjoying Him, of being in relationship with Him, of walking with Him wherever life takes us.

Now, we cannot enjoy someone that we do not know. And God does desire that we know Him. How do we get to know someone? We spend time with them, talking with them, both telling of ourselves and listening to them. We hear their heart and they hear ours. The same is true of a relationship with God. And how do we do this? This is where the Bible, the Word of God comes in. He inspired this and gave it to us as a revelation of

His character and heart. *That* is the primary reason we should be reading the Bible—to know Him better. And let's not forget about prayer. Jesus was all about prayer. He taught His disciples how to pray—both in attitude and content. (Now see? I told you I wasn't against reading the Bible or praying!)

Enjoying Him also means enjoying the things He enjoys. What does He enjoy? He enjoys seeing people come to know Him and develop a relationship with Him. He delights people who seek Him. He jumps up and down to cheer for those who hold fast to their faith, no matter what. This should give us a new vision for how to approach people. We should be for people, not against them. We should delight in seeing spiritual maturity. We should jump up and down as they see themselves as He sees them. And if they can't have such a vision, we should seek to help them catch that vision.

The fact is, however, that many of the attributes we can know and enjoy about God we can only experience through the hardest times in our lives. We can only experience the love of God in the deepest sense when we come face to face with our own depravity. We can only experience His grace in its fullest when we truly realize how unworthy we are. We can experience His provision only as we have need. And we can only experience and know His holiness as we compare it to our own version of holiness (i.e., filthy rags).

## **WHO IS THIS WHOM WE GLORIFY AND ENJOY?**

There are many ways that God is described in Scripture. In fact, whole books have been written on this

very subject.<sup>20</sup> There is no way to adequately describe Him in the space here—or in any other book, for that matter, no matter the depth or the length. He is simply too much for words to contain.

Yet, it is my firm belief that He does want us to know and experience (enjoy) Him. Thus, He reveals Himself to us, both through Scripture and other means. Paul says that His attributes can be known through creation, for example (Rom. 1:19-20). In addition, He revealed Himself to men through the events of history, later written down in Scripture. So, we ask two questions that are relevant to our discussion:

\* As Pharaoh asked, “Who is the Lord?” (In other words, tell me some about His character traits.)

\* What is His purpose for our lives as believers?

### 1) *Who is the Lord?*

In answering this question, let’s simply look at what God said about Himself. We find a great “introduction”, if you will, in Exodus 34:

The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. 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.” (Ex. 34:5-7)

There are some very important things we learn about the character of the God we serve from this passage. And, to

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<sup>20</sup> In fact, for a more in-depth look at this section, see my book *Keys to the Kingdom: Foundations for Growth and Change* (JPT Books, 2019), available at [thegospeltoday.online/jptbooks/](http://thegospeltoday.online/jptbooks/).

keep this in perspective, in case you've forgotten, this is in the *Old* Testament. I point this out because many have the misconception that the God of the Old Testament is one of holiness and death, and the God of the New Testament is totally different. Not so.

What is the first thing that God says about Himself? He is a God who is "merciful and gracious." Often the first things a person will say about himself are the most important things (or the things he wants another to most know about him). God felt it important right from the start to let us know that He is a God full of mercy and grace. And we can confirm that throughout the pages of Scripture (in both the Old and New Testaments) as well as down through the subsequent ages. And that is an important truth. One does not have to look very far to see the evidence of God's character, as He proclaimed it.

The next thing we learn about God is that He abounds "in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands." I picture a love that simply does not let go or give up. No matter what the consequences, no matter the cost, His love remains. And it is this love and faithfulness, combined with His mercy and grace, which made our redemption possible.

Finally, we learn in this passage that He is a God who forgives "iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty." That seems to be a paradox. How would he forgive sin and transgression, yet not "clear the guilty"? The answer is found in the death and resurrection of Christ. He forgives our sin because Christ paid the penalty. And when Christ was raised from the dead, it proved 1) that He was righteous, and 2) that God accepted His payment for sin. Since we

have been united with Christ, God is thus able to declare us righteous in His sight.

There is one more attribute of God that we must keep in mind – though it is not mentioned in this passage: holiness. God is holy. That means different things to different people. I doubt that we could ever fully comprehend the idea. At the most basic level, holiness rolls up all of God's other attributes into one. That is to say, He is perfectly merciful, perfectly loving, perfectly just, etc. That is why in Scripture the shekinah glory, His very presence is seen as a blinding light. White light contains every other color, just as all of God's attributes are contained within His holiness.

Of course, there is the idea that He is free from sin, from moral imperfections, and that is what most people think of when they consider that word *holy*. And so He has called us to be *holy* just as He is. What does that mean for us? It means not only getting rid of those "moral imperfections" (yes, even the so-called "little" ones), but also that we become like He is—perfectly merciful, perfectly loving, perfectly just—perfect in every area. And it is that process (called *sanctification* by theologians) that is the real center of the battle we face.

## 2) *What is His purpose for us as believers?*

In asking the question about our purpose, we are not, of course, asking "What is God's individual plan for your life?" Rather, we are talking about His general will and purpose for us as believers – the purpose that we all share in common. As we said earlier, it is simply to glorify Him, in all that we are and do. And that purpose come about as we become more like Christ. Paul writes

that the “apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers” were given by God, .” . . until we all attain to 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” (Eph. 4:13). What does that lofty wording mean? It means that we are to be conformed to His image—not physically, of course. He is speaking here of character.

Paul further defines what he means in his letter to the Philippians. He writes that they should

complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. . . . Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:2-8)

What we see here is a picture of the attitude of Christ, and believers are called to develop that same mind and attitude. Paul makes a point of mentioning that Christ was obedient—even to the point of death on a cross. It is most often our sufferings that bring our character in line with His.

And the truth is, God is not really concerned with us being comfortable here. He is concerned with our character. We can have the God of comfort (but you can have that ONLY when you really need comfort), or we can have the God of the comfortable, but we can't have both.

As we have seen, our purpose in this life is simply to bring Him glory. He accomplishes this through the process of changing us to be more like Him. Therefore, if we truly want to bring Him glory, we will align our purpose with His—that of being transformed into the image of Christ. In the next chapter, we will take a look at the path of faith—namely what it takes to be transformed into His image.



## 4 The Path of Faith

In this chapter we will take a look at the faith journey. Before we start on that journey, however, let's review a few things that we have learned and that will be important.

### **The Principles of the Faith Realm**

Yes, we keep bringing these up. We keep bringing them up because they are what keeps us properly grounded in a right understanding of faith.

- \* Biblical faith always has the God of the Bible as its object.*
- \* Biblical faith is rooted in the character of God.*
- \* Biblical faith is submitted to the will of God.*

### **The Contrast Between Law and Faith**

- \* Law is about following external regulations; faith is about walking in our identity.*
- \* Law leads to death; faith leads to life.*
- \* Law stands for playing it safe, knowing what to expect, striving for the comfortable; faith stands for walking with God day-by-day in the place where He leads and where everything does not always make sense.*

### **Our Purpose and His Purpose**

- \* Our purpose in life is to bring Him glory – in all that we are, say, do and think.*
- \* His purpose for our lives is to conform us to the image of Christ*
- \* When our purpose is aligned with His purpose for us, then we are walking by faith.*

With those thoughts in mind, we can now begin our journey.

## THE ROAD OF FAITH

In an earlier chapter, we took a look at the starting point of faith—our salvation experience. Each of us has one. We are never “born into” faith. Even if you can’t remember a specific time where you trusted Christ for your salvation, there was a time where you had to acknowledge Him as Lord.

As we mentioned, after our salvation comes the real struggle—the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit. The battle can be hard and intense at times. Often well-meaning believers can lead a new believer down a path that leads into keeping the law. “Just pray through it! Pray more, read your Bible more, follow the rules and principles and you’ll grow and be blessed!” Sounds reasonable, right? So, the new believer has a choice.

It is at this point that the two paths diverge. The road of faith continues, reaching for nothing more than a successful Christian life, ministry, happy, healthy family, opportunities to share the faith—that are not too inconvenient, mind you. At the end of his life, people will indeed say, “He was a good Christian, he had a successful ministry, he touched many people.”

The road *to* faith, however, stretches forward, revealing a life that sees every opportunity, not as a chance to be “blessed”, but as an opportunity to see the Presence. The person on this road allows the Presence to penetrate even the darkest corners of the heart, so that the smallest foxes may be driven out, that they not spoil the

vines. The road to faith is a road that is built on and lined with pain and heartache, because the heart that is traveling this road identifies with the sufferings of Christ and knows that it is not home yet. The blessings of this life mean nothing to the heart on this road, for it has glimpsed eternity and will settle for nothing less. At the end of this life, man may say, "He had a hard life." God will say, "He knew Me, and I knew Him. We walked and talked together. He was faithful with much, so he will receive much."

Let me be clear: *Both of these paths are walked by believing Christians.* The first simply settled for less than what God called him to be. He was content to live "in the world", which inevitably ends up looking a lot *like* the world. The other chose the things above, namely the Presence of God, above the things of the world. If that sounds harsh, then consider the words of Jesus:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. . . . Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For . . . your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you (Matt. 6:19-21, 31-33).

Notice that Jesus said nothing about comfort, nothing about a successful ministry, nothing about being blessed, nothing even about having a happy family. He said we would receive what we need. That is not our treasure. *The things of earth are not to be our treasure, no*

*matter how cleverly they are disguised as “spiritual” or “good” things.* Those things could never satisfy the deepest cry of our heart to be known by God and to know Him.

Is it even possible to live such a life? Absolutely! History is full of examples in every century. We just don't see them as much because the western church is not persecuted, and that is often what is required to bring out that type of faith. It is a case where the Western Church is out-of-touch with the persecuted church in the rest of the world. Is it easy to live such a life? Absolutely not! Who wants to pick up a cross daily and struggle with the deepest longings of our heart when it's easier to deal with the sins closer to the surface so that we can be “blessed”?

While it is not easy to live the deeper life that I've just described, the requirements are simple to understand, at least in theory:

If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? (Matt. 16:24-26)

Before we look at what Jesus says about the road of discipleship, it is wise to look at the context in which He said it. Peter had just confessed that Jesus was “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:15). Jesus blessed him in response: “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (v. 17). This was certainly a high moment in Peter's life, to be sure! He got it right. In the midst of everything else that had been said

and done, all the corrections that Jesus made and would make, Peter got it right.

Then, Jesus takes Peter's confession to its logical conclusion—identifying His purpose: He must “suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (v. 21). Peter, as impulsive as ever, takes Jesus aside and begins to *rebuke* Him! “Far be it from You, Lord! This shall never happen to You” (v. 22). That didn't work out very well for Peter, as Jesus “turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man’” (v. 23). That's pretty strong language. Was Jesus really saying that Peter was Satan or possessed by Satan? Not at all. Rather, He was saying that Peter's *thoughts* were from Satan. Notice that He charged Peter with setting his *mind* on the things of man. That says to me that Peter was more concerned with Jesus' comfort (and perhaps his own—who *wouldn't* want to avoid the cross?), rather than the purposes of God. It is in this context that Jesus gives us these words: *Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Me.*

- *Deny himself.* We have taken these words to mean “Deny sin.” That's not quite what He said. He said, “Deny yourself.” That means setting everything aside, including your own desires to be comfortable in this life.
- *Take up his cross.* Any time the cross is referred to, it always speaks of suffering. We see it as a symbol of His triumph—and it certainly is that. However, it is triumph through suffering. More than that, “his cross” refers to the entire will of God for the believer. In taking up our cross, we voluntarily submit ourselves to God's will for our lives. Taking up our cross, then, is not the “bear my cross” that

most people say, as in “Oh, it’s just the cross I have to bear”, out of duty and drudgery. No! Paul says that, because we have peace with God, “we rejoice in our sufferings.” Rejoice? In suffering? How could one possibly do that? Because “[we know] that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (Rom. 5:3-4). So, our suffering has a purpose: His purpose. He does not call us to be comfortable, He calls us to be transformed into His image.

- *Follow Me.* This seems simple enough. But, take another look. There are no qualifications. There’s just a period. That means, “Follow Me, wherever I may lead.” There’s an old saying, especially in the military, “I’d follow that man to hell and back!” Jesus wants that kind of devotion. Whether we are on the mountaintop or in the deepest valley, we can simply bask in His presence.

That’s all. Three commands. Deny yourself. Take up your cross. Follow Him. Yet, they lay claim to all that we have, all that we are. Though we may settle for something less, He does not settle. He constantly pursues us. He will not let His own be content here.

## GOD WILL NOT LET YOU GO

Many in the church today want to live “the Blessed Life.”<sup>21</sup> There are many problems with this approach, some of which we identified in earlier chapters. Let’s take another look at them.

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<sup>21</sup> This phrase was taken from the popular book *The Blessed Life* by Robert Morris, former pastor of Gateway Church. For an examination of this idea, see my book *From Blessed to Transformed: Embracing the Way of the Cross* (JPT Books, 2018), available at [thegospeltoday.online/jptbooks/](http://thegospeltoday.online/jptbooks/).

1) This approach puts Christians under something they were never intended to be under — namely the law, with its curses. Why is this important? Because no matter how hard you try, you cannot keep the entire law perfectly, and that is what is required to obtain the blessing.

2) As we noted earlier, the blessings of this life, whether they be material (home, car, other possessions), ministry-related, or even relational (happy family), *cannot satisfy the deepest desire of the human heart*. That desire is to know God and to be known by Him.

3) This final point is related to the last one — and it's a big one. It can be summed up in one word: God. God will not let us settle for the comfortable life, no matter how much we may want to. Have you ever asked yourself, "I'm doing all the right things, why is this happening to me?" (Be honest, now!) That is why. He is trying to get your attention and remind you that *you are not home yet*. This world is not your home. As a popular song says,

*When friends betray us  
When darkness seems to win  
We know that pain reminds this heart  
That this is not our home*

....

*What if my greatest disappointments  
Or the aching of this life  
Is the revealing of a greater thirst  
This world can't satisfy?*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Laura Story, "Blessings," in *Blessings*, INO Records, 2011, MP3

There was a popular book written many years by Tommy Tenney called *God Chasers*. I believe his book was a voice crying in the wilderness for us to seek after God. At the same time, I do want to say that as much as we might chase Him, our God is a people chaser, and will always pursue us longer and harder than we would ever pursue Him.

## WHAT THEN OF THE LAW?

If we have established that the Christian is not to live “under law, but under grace,” what does that mean? What does that look like in the life of the believer? And more importantly, what of the law? Is it simply of no value to us as believers?

As we have mentioned, let no one accuse us of saying that the law no longer has value. Paul himself calls the law spiritual, holy, just and good. He likens the law to a tutor, showing us the way to Christ. How does it do that? It leads us to Christ by teaching us that we could, in ourselves, never measure up to God’s standards. The law reveals the character and heart of God, and is a picture of what we should be like—and what we are being transformed into. Yet the law does not have the power to transform. Only Christ can do that.

What do these ideas mean for topics such as emotional healing, decision making, and financial stewardship, then? Do we dismiss all of the practicalities in favor of just “knowing Christ?” These and other such topics will be the focus of the rest of this book. Admittedly, perhaps we will raise more questions than we answer. But, there is One above who knows the answers. Read on.



## 5 To Be or Not To Be

In one of my favorite movies of all time, *The Lion King* (yes, really!), the grown-up Simba sees a vision of his father (who has been dead a long time), Mufasa.<sup>23</sup> Simba is told, “You have forgotten me.” Of course, Simba declares, “I could never forget you!” Mufasa answers, “You have forgotten who you are, and so forgotten me. You are my son. . . . You are more than what you have become.” In many ways, that describes the modern church. We are so focused on ministry, life, blessings, that we have forgotten Him. And that forgetting tends to show up in two different types of people that are both found in Luke 15:

1) *The Older Brother* – The older brother in Luke 15 protested to his father: “I did everything you asked of me, but you didn’t give me a single thing, not even a small goat so I could have a party” (Luke 15:29-30, paraphrase). The modern Older Brother is like that. He (or she) expects to receive God’s blessings because he followed the rules. And when he doesn’t get his way, he grumbles, especially when it seems that others get blessed who are not quite as spiritual as he is. The focus is on the rules and the blessings, not the God of the Bible.

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<sup>23</sup> *The Lion King*, DVD, directed by Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff (1994; USA: Buena Vista Pictures, 2003). On a side note, I can’t recommend the 2019 remake of the movie.

2) *The Younger Brother* – Notice that I did not say the Prodigal Son. There's a reason for this. The younger brother had an entitlement mentality. He said to his father, "Give me what's mine!" (Luke 15:12, paraphrase). In truth, it *was* his because he was an heir. Yet, he wanted it *now*. He got what he wanted and ran off and wasted it. At this point, he is still the younger brother. He didn't become the Prodigal Son until he returned home. The modern Younger Brother claims that he should have anything he asks of God because "I'm Your son, and it's my inheritance!" That sounds much like the same arrogant spirit as the older brother.

We have both of those in the church today. The Younger Brother is usually easier to spot. The Older Brother comes in a variety of forms, some very subtle. But, the bottom line for both is that they focus on themselves, no matter how "spiritual" they make it sound.

## **THE BASIS FOR CHRISTIAN BEHAVIOR AND GROWTH**

What do we say, then? Why am I to live right? Or does it even matter how I live, now that I'm saved? Both of those questions deserve serious answers. Are we to live "right" in some sort of arrangement with God, where we do right and He blesses us, as many assert today? Or, are we entitled to His blessings no matter how we live? Does how we live play any part at all in whether we are blessed or not?

I suggest that the answers to these questions are *yes* and *no*, respectively. Yes, it does matter how we live. But, no, our works (or righteous living) are not God's criteria for blessings – at least not in this life. Our basis of righteous living should stem from one solitary point – *it is who we are as redeemed and reborn children of God*. There has been much written on the subject of our identity in Christ. It is not my intent to revisit those works. What I want to suggest is that we take that a step further. Many have used our “identity” as another method, mainly to improve one's self-esteem. I want to propose that there is more to our “identity” than this – that it contains actual power.

Before we talk about our identity as believers (don't be skipping ahead now), I want to explore why an understanding of identity is so important to our growth and the basis of our behavior – indeed it is one of two primary keys for growing in Christ (the other being a proper understanding of God).

When writing to young Timothy, the apostle Paul wrote, “No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him” (2 Tim. 2:4). This verse has been used in many different ways, to teach many different things. However, the basic point of the statement is simply this: *You are a soldier now. It is who you are. So, do things a soldier does, and avoid other things. Act like a soldier.* In the same way, Dr. Neil Anderson reminds us that, “A runner runs.”<sup>24</sup> Likewise, a teacher teaches. It's what they do. So, if you are a sinner, apart from Christ, you will sin. In the same vein, a saint, one who is redeemed and born again, will begin

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<sup>24</sup> Anderson, *Victory*, e-book, Chapter 2.

to be transformed into the image of Christ, because it's what happens.

Now, how exactly *does* that happen? That is the question. Is it through our works, our striving, that this transformation takes place? Let's look at a passage from James that may give us some insight:

For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. (James 1:23-25).

What do we learn from this passage? Here are a few points to think about:

1) The law is like a mirror that shows us what the character of a believer should look like. When someone is saved, he or she does not automatically know how to live in the new freedom of Christ. That is the purpose of the law — not to set rules and penalties, but to give us a fenced area in which to explore freely.

2) To be a hearer (as opposed to a doer) of the word means that one does not know or understand his or her identity in Christ. Keep in mind here that James is writing to Christians — fellow believers. He might have easily spoken Mufasa's line from earlier: "You have forgotten who you are."

3) Unlike a hearer of the word, a doer knows his or her identity and walks according to it (thereby walking in faith, as we mentioned in an earlier chapter).

4) James indicates that the one who continues to look into the perfect law of liberty and remembers his or her identity will act accordingly. Notice here that James speaks of perseverance, which Paul calls a “fruit” of the Spirit, not a “work.” Fruit is grown. I hear James saying, “As long as you remember who you are and hang on, even in the tough times, you’ll do well.”

At this point when discussing James, the question inevitably comes up about James’ insistence that we are justified by works.<sup>25</sup> Let’s first note here that James is *not* talking about the law. Rather, he is talking about “works” — the same kind of works that flow from a person’s identity. Jesus said much the same thing when he reminded us that a good tree bears good fruit, and a bad tree bears bad fruit. Or, to repeat what we said earlier, a teacher teaches; a runner runs. It’s who they are, and what they do. What James is saying is that your works show your faith. A similar example can be seen when Jesus healed the paralytic. He said, “Son, your sins are forgiven you” (Matt. 9:2) Then, after the Pharisees objected, He said, “But so that you may know that the Son of Man has power to forgive sins . . . .” (Matt. 9:6). His actions showed that He had the power. Likewise, our works show what has already taken place.

Does this mean we’ll be perfect? Not at all! John reminds us that “if we say we have no sin, we deceive

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<sup>25</sup> See James 1:14-26.

ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). What this does mean, however, is that the new desires that a believer has will work themselves out in how he or she lives. Can a Christian squelch those desires? Absolutely. But, *they are still present*. That is the key thing to remember here.

Many believers often reach a point where they doubt or question their own salvation experience. This is normal. That comes from their realization that they are not walking in all that God has for them. They often feel like failures and "a disappointment to God." Let me say first that you cannot disappoint God. He already knows everything about you, your failures as well as your victories—and He chose you anyway. The questions and doubts are not the problem. The problem, rather, lies in the solution that many find. Instead of accepting who they are and walking in that identity as best they know at any given moment—knowing that God's grace and mercy is enough, they often choose the road of pressure, commitment, works, and living under the "rules." Christ doesn't call us to "act like a better Christian." He calls us to "become transformed into His image." And that transformation takes time. It is the process that Paul refers to when he speaks of "growing up" in Christ. We aren't disappointed with a baby when he or she can't add yet. Likewise, we should not be surprised when young (or old) believers stumble. What we can expect from a believer who is walking in his or her identity is *growth*.

## THE END OF THE MATTER

In short, a believer lives up to the "standards", not because they are the "rules", but simply because it is part

of his or her makeup. The whole New Testament is filled with the picture of a believer (a short version is found in the Sermon on the Mount, and also in the book of 1 John). In fact, 1 John was written so that the reader could “look into the mirror” and see his identity and thereby be assured of his salvation. Again, we are not talking about perfection—even John admits this. But we are talking about growth.

In the next chapter, we are going to look at the new Covenant and the new identity we have been given as believers. I stated earlier that I believe there is actual power in the New Covenant—it’s not just a principle or a way of thinking, but is objective reality. The key to that power is, as with all things, faith—true, Biblical faith. Read on.





## 6 The New Covenant

In the last chapter, we began a discussion of the believer's identity and the role it plays in the believer's growth. We suggested that there is actual power in the New Covenant—power that can change us through the work of Christ. In this chapter, we'll continue with that thought, by looking at the New Covenant—what it is and what it means for us.

### A QUICK REFRESHER

Before talking about the New Covenant, let's revisit the Old quickly. Though much of the first five books of the Bible contain the specifics, the basis for the Old Covenant is found in Exodus 20, in what we call the Ten Commandments:

God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. . . . You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. . . . Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. . . . Honor your father and your mother. . . . You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet." (Ex. 20:1-17)

This passage forms the basis of everything else. In later chapters, we see these principles expanded to cover many different situations. But, you'll note that when the New Testament writers mention specifics of the law, they always reference this passage or what Jesus referred to as the Greatest Commandment, which is an even shorter summary of the law. Indeed, Jesus said, all the law and the prophets hang on those commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30-31). Now, let's take a look at a few key things to remember about the Old Covenant:

\* *The law was not given as a means to salvation.* Both the Old and New Testaments confirm this. In fact, God begins the Law by stating: "I've already saved you, and because I have, here is the covenant for you to walk in." It's not, "Follow the law to be saved." Rather it's "Follow the Law because you are saved."

\* *The law was given to reveal the character of both God and man.* The law reveals God's righteous standards and His character. It is not just about outward appearance but attitudes of the heart. As we mentioned earlier, the law is like a mirror. So, God was saying, "This is what I look like, therefore this is what you should look like."

\* *The Law promised blessings when obeyed and curses when broken.* We touched on this in an earlier chapter. "Do right and be blessed, do wrong and be cursed." But, keep in mind, the blessings that the law promises are *for this life only!* The law could neither promise nor give eternal life.

As good and holy as the law is (after all, it *was* given by a holy and perfect God), it had a weak point: *The law can only command obedience. It cannot give the power to obey.* Since we are all fallen in Adam, we will all stumble and

fall short of the law's demands. And not only that, but also even when we *do* think we get it right, we really don't. The law is so pure that even the tiniest blemish, the slightest misstep in word, thought, attitude or deed condemns us as guilty. But, as Pastor Steve Brown says, "I have good news and bad news for you. The bad news is, *you're a whole lot worse than you think you are!* The good news? *You're a whole lot worse than you think you are!*"

Now, I'm perfectly capable of understanding the bad news part of that equation. But that as good news? That's a hard one to swallow. Why is that good news? The simple answer? *Grace*. God's grace revealed to you and through you. And that is the essence of the New Covenant.

## THE POWER OF THE NEW COVENANT

In Jeremiah 31, the Lord laid out the New Covenant (we mentioned this in an earlier chapter). Now, we will take a closer look at it, and what it really means for us as believers.

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 on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: 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. 31:1-3)

This New Covenant has something the Old Covenant lacked: power. The law, in itself, does not have the power to make or even help one obey it. It can only condemn. The New Covenant, however, gives us the power to obey.

Keep in mind that the New Covenant, like all the laws and promises in the Old Testament, was given firstly to Israel. Jesus said that His death would institute the New Covenant (see Luke 22:20). So, now, Israel as a nation is free to enter the New Covenant. But, He didn't stop there. In Acts, He opened the door to the Gentiles, so that everyone could enjoy the New Covenant. Paul agrees with this in 1 Corinthians 11, when he quotes Jesus' words: "In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'"<sup>26</sup> Having established that, let's now look at the terms of the covenant:

- *The Law is now written on our hearts.* No longer are we bound to obey external regulations. Rather, the Law becomes a part of us.
- *Everyone will be able to know the LORD intimately.* In the Old way, only a select few people could be said to have "known" God (Moses, David and Abraham are examples). The nation as a whole had to go through the High Priest, and even then, no High Priest was ever said to have "known" God as Moses, David, and Abraham did. Since the Spirit of

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<sup>26</sup> 1 Cor. 11:25. Note that Paul was writing to a Gentile church, indicating that Gentiles are partakers of the New Covenant.

Christ now lives in every believer, we can know Him personally.

The Lord also spoke to and through Ezekiel about the New Covenant. Let's now look at that passage and see what else we learn:

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 be my people, and I will be your God. And I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses. (Ezek. 36:25-29)

Much of this is paralleled in Ezekiel 11. Here, however, is the basic point of this passage: *We have a new identity.* "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." Two key things happened here. First, He promises that we will be clean. Our sins won't just be covered, they will be cleansed — done away with. Second, He promises that we will have a new identity—a whole new nature that will want to walk in His ways. Paul echoes this thought in 2 Corinthians 5:17, when he says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."

Those are the three key parts of the New Covenant: cleansing from sin, new identity, and new relationship.

Now, let's note a few other important facts about this covenant:

- *It is God's covenant with us – not the other way around.* Note the repeated use of “I will.” Nowhere in those passages do we see “I will if you will.” It is simply “I will.”
- *Freedom from condemnation.* “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do” (Rom. 8:1-3). The penalty for our sin has been paid, and thus there is no longer grounds for condemnation. In addition, we are now free to walk in the “new way” of the Spirit.
- *Power to choose.* As believers, we now have the same choice that Adam had – to choose (see below for this discussion).

If we as believers have this great new start, then what keeps us from living out our identity? Simply put, *the flesh*. The flesh, generally speaking, is that part of us that is programmed to live independently of God. It is that part of us that actively pursues the lie that, “You can be your own God, and do it your own way!” Theologians debate whether it is part of the soul, spirit or body, but two things are clear: First, it resides in every human ever born, save for Adam, Eve, and Jesus.<sup>27</sup> Second, the flesh cannot be redeemed, reprogrammed, or otherwise rehabilitated. The flesh will always be hostile to God.

When talking about the flesh, Paul talks about two different types of people. Let's now take a look at these

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<sup>27</sup> Adam and Eve, were obviously not born with it, since they had perfectly free will to choose to obey. They were made slaves to the flesh and sin after they disobeyed in the Garden.

two groups of people and how the flesh functions in their lives:

But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. (Rom. 6:17-18)

Paul divides all of humanity into two groups: those who are slaves of sin and those who are slaves of righteousness. For the first, the flesh rules them completely. They cannot choose to live apart from the flesh. They are “slaves” in the true sense of the word. Everyone is born this way, and all continue in this condition unless and until they are born again in Christ.

The second group consists of those who have received salvation through faith. Paul says in the same chapter that this group of people has “died to sin” and likewise has been “set free from sin” (Rom. 6:1-11). Though they are described as “slaves”, they are also described as being “free’. That is why Paul urges them to “not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness” (Rom. 6:13). Those of us who have been set free have a real choice. We can now choose to live righteously. Not only do we have an actual choice, but also we now have the *desire* to live righteously, in a manner that is pleasing to God.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> It is worth noting here that living in a manner pleasing to God consists of more than just the standard Christian prohibitions. Indeed, it is more about who we are in character and attitude.

Whatever else we can learn from Romans 6-7 (and we can learn much—whole books have been written on these two chapters), we learn that neither the law nor the flesh has dominion over us. Speaking of the law, let us return briefly to that last principle of the realm of law, sin and death: *The law has authority over a person only as long as he or she lives.* Paul agrees with this when he writes:

Or do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives? For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.

Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God. For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code. (Rom. 7:1-6)

Since, as Paul argues, we died to the law when we were identified with Christ's death (see Romans 6 for this), the old way of the written code has now been replaced by the new way of the Spirit. In short, we now have a new Master.

### **The Question: To Be or Not To Be? The Spirit or the Flesh?**

If you are a believer in Christ, you have a choice—each of us has the same choice. Will we walk according to the Spirit, according to who we are in Christ? Or will we choose the self-gratifying desires of the flesh? This



choice is not a one-time decision. It is constant choice that we must make. Unfortunately, the flesh is tricky, passing itself as good and even spiritual sometimes. That is the error that has invaded the church today. The next chapter will look at what the flesh might look like in your church (or even your life) and the only proper response to it—death.



## 7 A Portrait of the Flesh

*But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 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. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Gal. 5:16-24)*

These words are probably very familiar to us in the church. I'm sure you've heard more than one sermon on them—perhaps even a whole series. The passage does lend itself to such things quite easily. My aim, however, is not to take the passage apart, but give a “snapshot” of both the flesh and the Spirit, and what they might look like today. But first, a few general thoughts.

It's worth noting that Paul puts “walking in the flesh” on an equal basis with being “under the law.” He says that if we are led by the Spirit we are not under the law. The inverse of that is also true—if we walk according to the flesh we *are* under the law. Remember our discussion of the two realms from earlier? Here we see that you can choose to walk in one or the other, but not both at the same time.

The second thing to note about this passage is the difference in how the flesh and the Spirit are manifested—how they show up. Paul writes, “Now the *works* of the flesh are evident.” In the Bible *works* always imply something that we do apart from God, it is our attempt to “do it our own way.” However, Paul describes “the *fruit* of the Spirit.” There are a few implications here that are important:

- Fruit is grown over time, whereas “works” have an immediate quality to them.
- While we can provide the proper soil, water and fertilizer for fruit, *we cannot make fruit grow*. Only God can do that. Likewise, only God can produce the fruit of the Spirit in us.

In an earlier chapter, I suggested that the flesh can take many forms—even forms that look good, spiritual, even “Christian.” How is it that this could be true? In order to answer that question, let’s revisit Jesus’ requirements for discipleship, but this time from a different, though similar, passage:

Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. . . . So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:25-33)

Admittedly, these are tough words. And their meaning has been debated for centuries. Jesus (and the New Testament writers) often had a way of speaking that invited sharp distinctions, such as love/hate, light/dark,

etc. Jesus has already told us that “hate” in one’s heart is the same thing as murder. So, He therefore *cannot* mean “hate” as we understand it.

What Jesus is saying here can be summed up in one word: *priorities*. He wants first place in our life. More than that, He wants not only us, not only our life, but everything we have, everything we are. His disciples are to say, “I have nothing, You have everything. I am nothing, You are everything.” Therefore, if He chooses to remove someone or something from our world, we are to say, “It is Yours.” Granted, that is often a hard thing to confess – and mean it.

What does this have to do with our discussion of the flesh and the law? It is relevant because in our struggle for “the Blessed Life”, or even just a comfortable life, we are placing those things above Him. Consider this:

\* When we ask, “How can I be financially secure and blessed,” and settle for paying our tithes (which, by the way, is part of that law that we are no longer under), going to church, using our wisdom and Biblical principles to manage our money, we place that goal above knowing Him and allowing Him to work in our lives.

\* When we ask, “How can my church [or my ministry] grow,” and we hire growth experts, study the latest fads (excuse me, *trends*), and develop a “church growth strategy,” we have placed that goal above His goal of seeing His Spirit work in the church.

\* When we ask, “How can we make the message more relevant,” then study the trends of what “works” and what doesn’t, we place that goal above seeing God’s Spirit at work in and through us. (By the way, God’s message will *always* be relevant, and does not need any help from us.)

\* When a woman with an unloving, indifferent husband asks, “How can I win back my husband’s love,” instead of focusing on what the Spirit is saying to her, she has placed that goal above her deepest need.

In short, when we place any desire, no matter how good or spiritual above our deepest and first need—to know Christ and see Him glorified—we have settled for walking in the flesh, under the law, instead of walking by His Spirit in faith.

We must first immerse ourselves in Christ and His Word, to His the Spirit speaking to us. And then (and *only* then) can we go out into the world in the power and energy of Christ. And He will likely provide answers to those questions—but they *may not be the answers we wanted, hoped for or expected*. But by that time, we have abandoned ourselves to Him and His desires have become ours.

## **WHAT ARE WE TO DO WITH HIM?**

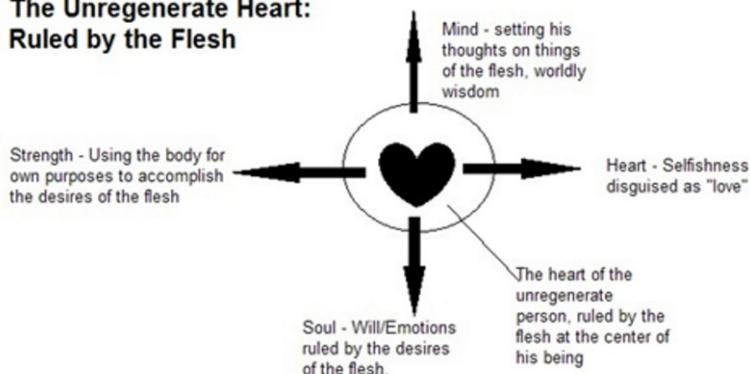
I’m sure we’ve all heard our parents say in exasperation, “What am I going to do with you?” I still like the tact one little boy took with his grandmother on that. She asked, “What am I going to do with you, lock you in a room and shove food under the door?” He answered, “Yes! I want cupcakes!” (Of course, she would never have done such a thing!)

Often when we have been awakened by the Spirit to the evil that is in our flesh, we get the same exasperation. The problem is we really don’t know what to do with it. And part of that problem lies in the fact that we don’t really understand what happened to us at

salvation. To understand that, let's go back to our discussion of the flesh in the last chapter.

When we are born, two things immediately make up our identity. First, as Dr. Larry Crabb notes, at the exact center of our makeup is the ability to connect – with God, with ourselves and with other people.<sup>29</sup> However,

**The Unregenerate Heart:  
Ruled by the Flesh**



that ability is functionally dead because of one other thing: the flesh. When we are born, the flesh is at the center of our being, ruling every thought, passion and desire of our life. We can sketch this out like so:

In this sketch, we see that the person has no choice in the matter. They are, as Paul said, "dead in their sin." They cannot choose to do right (which has implications beyond this book, but I'll leave you to ponder that). And since the definition of a righteous act is one done both in God's service and for His glory alone, the unregenerate person does not have any acts that he can claim as

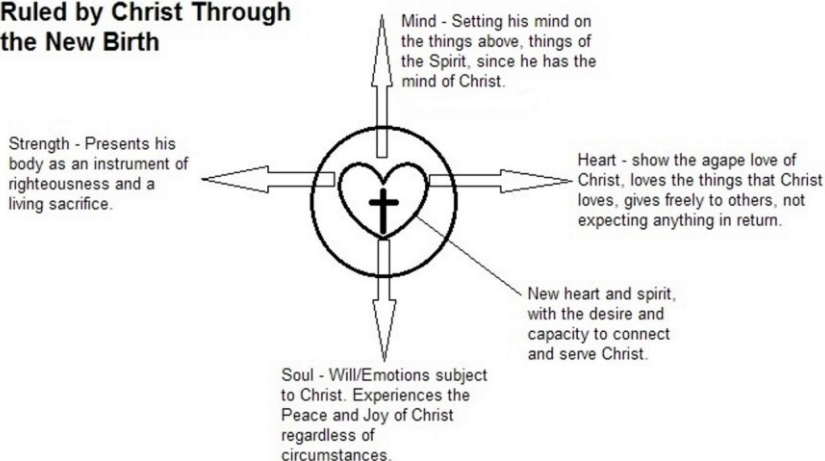
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<sup>29</sup> Crabb, *Connecting*, e-book, Chapter 4

“righteous.”<sup>30</sup> Paul says that we started out in the kingdom of darkness, and darkness does indeed rule the unregenerate person’s life.

Now, let’s talk about what happens when a person comes into relationship with Christ through salvation. First, remember God’s promise of the New Covenant to remove the heart of stone and give a heart of flesh. So we receive a new heart and spirit that are not only *able* to connect, but have the very *desire* to do so. In addition, Paul tells us that the flesh has been “crucified” – that is, put to death, by virtue of Christ’s death. Yet, he also tells us to “put to death the misdeeds of the flesh,” seemingly suggesting that the flesh is still alive and well. Let’s sketch this out:

#### **The Regenerate Heart: Ruled by Christ Through the New Birth**



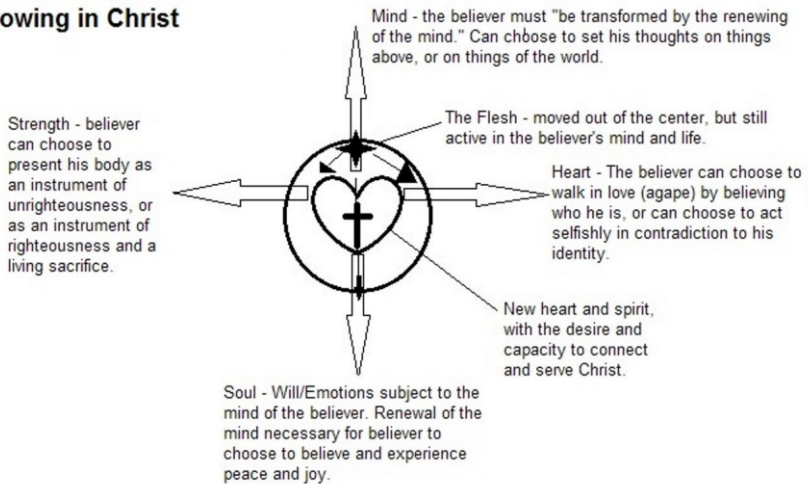
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<sup>30</sup> Of course, people can do “good works.” There is part of all of us that can do good things for others. Yet, even those fall short of the type of righteousness that the law demands.



In this sketch, we see that the person is controlled and led by the Spirit. He yields all that He has to Christ — thus fulfilling the Great Commandment of Mark 12:30. And he does this *willingly*, as it is simply who he has become. There is no external standard telling him how to live. Indeed, as Paul says, he is a law unto himself. Let me say one important thing about this sketch: *This is the goal. This is what we are aiming for.* You'll notice that this sketch makes no reference to the flesh. But, we know that we still deal with our flesh (see Romans 7 and 1 John 1:8-10 if you think otherwise). So, that is what we will be like when we reach heaven. Until then, the sketch below is what growth looks like:

**The Believer:  
Growing in Christ**



This is a more accurate picture of what it is to be a believer. We are made new, with a new heart and spirit. We desire to love God and obey Him, because it is our nature to do so. The flesh, while still present, is no longer at the center of our being. Rather our new relationship

with Christ is now the center. But, the flesh does still exert influence. That is why we are told to do two things:

- First, put to death the misdeeds of the flesh. What does that mean? It does *not* mean practices such as self-mutilation, or constantly putting ourselves down. It simply means to “consider ourselves dead to sin.” We are simply believing by faith what Christ has done for us—and enforcing it, if you will. We say, “I’m dead to that old lifestyle and those old thoughts. Christ has set me free, and I don’t have to obey that anymore!” Every time we choose to live by the Spirit and not gratify the desires of the flesh we are carrying out the work of crucifying (or mortifying, as the Puritans used to say) the flesh. Will we be perfect in this lifetime? No. And the reason this is so has to do with the second command.
- “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). You’ll notice in the last sketch that the “flesh” resides in the mind. This, I believe, is in accord with Paul’s statement that seems to imply that the battle against the flesh begins in the mind. The more we renew our minds, the more we learn the ways of God. And as we learn the ways of God, the more we are able to discern what is of the flesh and what is of God. Conversely, when we do not renew our minds, the harder it becomes to live according to our identity. It is not so much two dogs in a contest of strength, as some suggest. Rather, it is more like a tumor—a cancer, if you will—that can shrink over time as we renew our minds, or grow as we fail to do so. But, it will never be completely gone until we are glorified with Christ (Phil. 1:6).

In all of this, let’s keep in mind what the flesh does. It is that mechanism that acts independently of God. It is

the “I can do it my way” mentality. And why is that important? Because when we attempt to live by the “elementary principles of this world” to get a better life or what we want (no matter how good or spiritual it is), we are depending on our way.

Now, having identified the evil, what does it mean to kill it? As we said earlier, it does not mean thinks like self-harm or putting oneself down. It means instead, when facing a choice between desires, to elevate the desires of the Spirit above the desires of the flesh. As Dr. Larry Crabb writes, when we elevate the desires of the Spirit, fleshly desires become just that – desires. They are no longer demands (“God, I did my part, now it’s Your turn!”) When we elevate those Spirit-led desires, we are putting the flesh to death.

## **WHAT ARE THE SPIRIT’S DESIRES?**

If we are to elevate the desires that are of Christ, then we must be able to discern what they are. To answer that question, let’s look at what Jesus says about Him:

These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. . . . But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. . . . When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak. (John 14:25-26; 15:26; 16:13)

There is one common theme in all of these verses: *The Spirit always points to Christ and draws us closer to Him.*

Now, let's take just one example of that. A man is diagnosed with cancer. He is a Godly man. He loves Christ. He has a desire to be healed – wouldn't we all in that situation? What would a Spirit-led desire be, and what might a conversation with the Spirit look like? It might go something like this: *I am not going to heal you now. Instead I am going to draw you closer to Me – and arouse your appetite for me until you would rather have Me than be healed.* As the man nourishes that Spirit-led desire, he is crucifying the flesh, placing it in second place.

Now, many of us might see that as unloving, cruel, all manner of things. But that is because we are looking at it from our goal of being healed and having a good life, not the goal that Christ has for us—that of being transformed into His image. So, we can sum up a Spirit-led desire like this: Anything that stirs up our appetite for Christ, to know Him and be transformed to His image, is a Spirit-led desire. Any desire that settles for less is not of the Spirit. That statement does not address our comfort level, because it is possible to enjoy God and enjoy life at the same time. It is also possible to enjoy God, becoming more like Him, in the hardest struggles. Comfort or lack of comfort is not the issue, rather the issue is whose goal we are reaching toward.

In the next chapter, we will take a look at what the church might look like if we considered the implications of this discussion, and joining in with Christ's goal for our lives.

## 8 A New Portrait to Paint

The ideas presented in this book might well be new and foreign to you. You might have had an instant reaction of, “No way!” And that’s understandable, if you have spent many years in the church being trained in doctrine – even more so if you grew up in the church. We have talked about a lot of ideas, and I find myself now wanting to step back and collect my thoughts, as perhaps you also need to do.

In the next few pages, I want to walk back through some key ideas that have been discussed. I want to do this now as a means of winding this discussion down and bringing these ideas into a focus where they can be applied. As many of my students over the years might remember, one of my favorite questions is, “So what?” Theology, even *correct* theology is little more than useless knowledge without application (and *good* theology is that which leads the learner to a deeper understanding of and relationship with the Lord). Thankfully, though, the ideas we have wrestled with have deep applications.

Let’s first look at the key ideas in everything we’ve talked through. There are basically five of them:

1) Biblical faith is a faith that depends on Christ *alone*, not any set of laws or any type of system that makes life work. Biblical faith leaves *everything* in His hands.

2) Believers who place themselves under the law are inviting “bad” things to happen to them and settling for less than what they are called to be.

3) The goal of the Christian life is *not* a better life, but being transformed into His image. The means to that goal are entirely up to God.

4) Believers are called to live by “the liberty of the Spirit.” We are free, but, instead of using our liberty for the flesh, we are to serve one another out of love.

5) The basis for all that we say, do, think, and believe should be a fundamental change in our identity, graciously given to us by the Spirit of God – not an external command: “The letter kills, but the Spirit brings life.”

Everything that we have discussed up to this point is either a result of or contained within these ideas.

## CHURCH REDEFINED

Now before you get all excited, let me explain what I mean by that. When people – even Christians – hear the word “church,” it has certain connotations. People who “go to church” act certain ways. Churches have “services” that are structured certain ways. I want us to step back from those for a few moments, and instead focus on Christian “community.” In this way, we can set aside labels (such as denominations, ‘non-denominational’, and ‘inter-denominational’). We can set aside our ideas on form and structure. After all, there is room for all styles of worship in community – and indeed in the Kingdom.

What I want to focus on instead is the essence of community. What things should change in light of our discussion? How do we relate to God and to each other? Does the “how” of worship make a difference? Does the “how” of anything matter? Does our discussion have implications for what the church/community is supposed to be about?

In answering these questions, let me first say that I am *not against the church*. I am *for her*. I believe I was called to minister to the church some 20 years ago. The church is the Bride of Christ, bought with His blood, made righteous by His grace. The church is His Body on earth, a physical manifestation of His love, grace and mercy.

What I find disturbing, however, is that the church (at least in the west) has become just another “institution.” We have many of those—social, political, even religious. The church is starting to look a lot like the world. Now, many people have said that about the church over the years. But the thoughts behind that, as well as the solution, have never quite matched up with the cross. It all goes back to what we talked about in an earlier chapter—identity.

In finding out the identity of the church, and what she is to be about, let’s first revisit a passage we briefly looked at earlier: “Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him” (2 Tim. 2:3-4). In this passage Paul calls Timothy a “soldier” of Christ Jesus, and he calls several other people “soldiers” in his letters.<sup>31</sup> That tells me that we are to be “soldiers of Christ.” We are not soldiers in the flesh,

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<sup>31</sup> See Philippians 2:25 and Philemon 1:2 for two other examples.

however. As Paul says, we do not wrestle with flesh and blood (Eph. 6:12). Indeed, he reminds us that we are in fact soldiers in the same breath when he tells us to put on our armor. Contrary to many opinions, a soldier's job is to defend, not attack. A soldier is to defend those around him. Paul charges the "shepherds" of the flock with the same duty – to protect the flock.

I'm not, of course, suggesting that we sit back on our pews and pull the walls around us in order to "protect" ourselves. That's absolutely contrary to the spirit of the gospel. Jesus Himself said, "Go into all the world." That can more accurately be translated, "as you go." He called the early disciples (and by extension us as well) His "witnesses." Notice that He did not say, "Go, be My witnesses." Instead, He said, "You will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8). It's not a command, simply a statement of fact. They couldn't help themselves. As Peter and John told the Sanhedrin, "we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). Again, it goes back to the fundamental change of identity.

## **A PICTURE REVISITED AND REDRAWN**

To catch God's vision for the church today, we must first look at what the church was like then. Keep in mind that we are not talking about methods, form, church organization or anything like that here. I am not laying out a "model" of church administration to be slavishly followed here. Much has been said over the centuries about "living as the early church did." That seems to be a popular thought in the church of today – but why is that not a reality? Because how the early Christians actually lived has not been understood. Let's



take a look at two well-known passages that describe the early believers:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. . . . Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37)

As we mentioned, there has been much made about these passages. The underlying attitudes of the passages, however, has escaped us. These passages *do not* teach (or even support) ideas such as communal living, the social/political systems of socialism or communism, or the elimination of private property. It is clear that the believers “owned” things and property. But (and this is the key), they were willing to give it all up for the needs

of others. With that in mind, then, let's take a look at these passages in detail.

The first key idea that we notice is this: *The believers were not concerned about earthly possessions or a better life.* Their attitudes had completely changed after they were saved. They only cared about worship, fellowship and helping others in need. And they did whatever was necessary.

The second thing to notice in this picture of the early church is this: *Their actions were totally voluntary, not due to some outside force or command.* No one told them or commanded them to sell their houses, lands, or proceeds. This is made clear in Peter's rebuke of Ananias: "While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?" (Acts 5:4). The idea of a church commanding its members to sell their property or give it to the church is totally unscriptural and against the gospel.

The third point that we should take note of in this passage is this: *The believers had favor with the people.* Because of both the power that was displayed *and* the changed hearts of the believers, the people took notice! It wasn't necessary for someone to stand on a street corner and yell at the people to be saved. The people saw something they wanted.

The overall message of these passages is clear: The community of believers was devoted to only one thing: making disciples. (Note that Jesus did *not* say to make "converts," but "disciples.") All else was of secondary importance. It did not concern itself with political or even social debates, except to place them squarely within the framework of the gospel. The church itself echoed

Paul's words to Timothy: "No soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs." The work of the church is the gospel and the restoration of the Kingdom of God.

Now, let's bring our discussion forward to today. What should the church look like today? What should she be concerned with? How can the church get back that simple faith that has been lost over the centuries? When we attempt to paint a picture of the church today, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, this is, I believe, what it will look like, if we place Christ and His Kingdom first, and all else second:

1) The church is defined as "the called out ones." The word translated "church" in the New Testament is also translated "believers" and "assembly." The "called out ones" are will not be like the world. They will not think like the world. Indeed the church will remember that she is an alien and stranger here. She will not use the world's ideas or methods, lest the cross be emptied of its power.

2) Jesus gave only one mission to the church—make disciples. Not converts, but disciples. The job of a disciple is to become like his master. Though Jesus and the apostles spoke truths that have relevance to social, political and cultural issues, they sought to directly challenge none of those institutions. Rather, they sought to see the hearts of people freed and changed, knowing that change in those realms would then come naturally—as naturally as the attitudes of the believers found in the early church. Likewise, the church of today, when empowered by the changing grace of the Spirit, will not be just another political or social institution, but will focus on the hearts and souls of the lost around them. The church of today will remember that while Christ may call individual believers into the political or social arena to be lights of His grace, He did not call the church to divide its resources from its mission.

3) The teachings of the apostles centered on the change in identity. Even when giving instruction on how to live as a Christian, the context was always “This is what a Christian looks like. You have been saved, you are a new person. Therefore, this is how you should then live.” The shepherds of today will have that same focus. They will teach the disciples about their new identity and how to live “under grace”, not “under law.” They will teach discipleship—real discipleship that gives all to Christ and leaves the results in His hands.

4) The early church understood that persecution was a means of growth (and I’m talking about real persecution here, not being late for work or not being able to find a parking spot). After being threatened by the Jewish Council, Peter and John went back to the believers, and the prayer that they all prayed is interesting. It was not, “Lord, protect us from these evil rulers,” but rather, “Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness.” That is the job of the church. Simply to spread the message. The church of today will remember that there are no easy answer, no quick fixes, and that God desires a church that is growing spiritually, and will use any means necessary to accomplish that goal.

5) The church of today will not only tolerate, but indeed welcome other parts of the Body whose worship style, preaching style, or traditions are different from their own. This will be no paper alliance or simple acknowledgement. It will be a deep realization by Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians and Charismatics (to name just a few) that they are each a part of the Body, instead of their own denomination or congregation.

6) The church of today, when touched by the Spirit’s grace, will value community—real community where believers are free to be themselves. The community will be a place where people can see the darkest parts of their hearts washed away with Christ’s grace. The community will focus on connecting: people to God in true worship, people to people in loving service, and people to themselves in growing wholeness.

Notice that I have not given any “models” for doing the things I mentioned. This is because local communities are different, because the people that make them up are different. One group may do things one way, while another group does it another. But, at the core, the Spirit-led church will look like the picture I’ve painted above.

There are, to be sure, many questions out there arising from what has been written here. And I’m sure that most of them are centered around the practicalities of what we call “church life.” How should giving be handled? Confession and repentance? Communion? While there I have included thoughts on some of these topics in the Appendices, I have chosen not to directly comment on them here. For those who are interested in some guidance on thinking through these topics, I encourage you to start there. For now, let it simply be said that every decision of the church should be led by the Spirit and guided by the mission of the church: that of making disciples. Nothing else matters.

When the church takes her place as an assembly of believers that are Spirit-led instead of law-driven, when she puts away the worldly thinking and thinks as Christ thinks, she will have what it takes to withstand the end-times chaos that the Word promises. We are already in the beginnings of that, and the church must have the faith to endure. But, faith that simply settles for “God bless me since I’m doing right” won’t pass the test. It will be burned away in the fire. The faith that says, “Though He slay me, yet I will trust Him” is the faith that will be necessary – and indeed it is that faith that is the calling and destiny of the church.



## EPILOGUE: Stepping Back

After reading this book, some may conclude that I am simply another “church basher,” railing against the “worldly” church. And they would be partially right. I do desire, as I believe Christ does, to see the church stripped of all worldly affections. But, I do want to say that I love the church, as I mentioned earlier. She is the Bride of Christ, bought with His blood, and to think of her as any less is an insult to the Bridegroom.

After reading this book, some may dismiss it for lack of the author’s theological credentials. After all, I’ve not been seminary trained, hold no advanced degrees in theology or Greek or Hebrew, and am not ordained to preach. Those statements are all true (though I do have over 33 years of studying the Word behind me). But, thankfully, the content of the gospel does not rely on human wisdom or strength. It makes no difference whether I or Albert Einstein tell you, “Two plus two equals four.” The statement is true, regardless of credentials. The gospel of Christ and biblical truth is like that. It needs no credentials behind it.

In writing this book, the ideas have a revolutionary feel to me. Having been steeped in theological traditions, it has taken a whole new perspective to rightly understand them. Though it seems like a simple question, the question, “Why are we living as we do,” has profound implications. It calls into question the very core

of what it means to be a Christian. Is it, as some claim and live, a lifestyle choice, not much different than other religions (or atheism, for that matter)? Is it simply another system of do's and don'ts, albeit with a new twist? Or is it something entirely deeper, something that redefines a person?

It is the central thesis of this book that God has provided a whole new way, a whole new arrangement, for living. The old arrangement of "do right and be blessed, do wrong and be cursed" has been set aside. The new arrangement goes something like this: "No matter what happens, trust Me. Draw near to me. Don't seek to be comfortable here, for this is not your home. Trust My sovereign hand to provide what you need (as I define it, not you). And allow Me to empower you to speak with your unique voice the words of My gospel to the lost." There is no give-and-take, no give-to-get mentality in that. Instead it is casting all that we are onto Christ and allowing Him to mold us and determine the results.

It is the secondary theme of this book that what we do, how we think, and how we live should be defined by *who we are* as opposed to an external standard. I am a believer. Christ has saved me and given me abundant grace, love and mercy. Therefore I give out of the abundance that I have. I give what I have, eagerly, without expecting anything back (because I've already been given all things!) Since I'm a believer, and my identity has been changed from a sinner walking in darkness to a saint walking in the light, I live according to that. It is now my desire. I put off old ways and put on the new—not because "I'm supposed to live that way," but because *it is who I am*.



## FINAL THOUGHTS: THE GREATEST BLESSING

With those two things being said, I want to leave some final thoughts. There was a series many years ago taught by a well-known Bible teacher. It was titled, “How to Be Radically Blessed.” The theme of the series? You can probably guess it: obedience to God’s Word. The series promised blessings of all sorts, from emotional and physical to financial. Yet, there is a blessing far greater than any of those.

Jesus taught us what the Greatest Commandment is (see Mark 12:30). Now, I ask, “What is the greatest blessing?” It’s certainly not wealth, prosperity, physical health, successful ministry or any such thing. How do I know that? Because all of those are *temporary*. The greatest blessing is not even salvation. How can I say such a thing? Salvation, while it is a marvelous, wondrous, incomprehensible act of grace and love, *is only the beginning, the means to God’s end*. Salvation is the means by which we can enter into the Greatest Blessing — that of having an intimate, personal relationship with the very One who created us! And if we could have such a relationship, why would we settle for ANYTHING less?

If you are hurting, struggling, wounded, or just having a rough time of it, instead of trying to figure out what “you’re doing wrong” and fix it, I encourage you simply to sit before Christ and invite Him to stir your heart, so that you can discern the movement of the Spirit in your life. It’s entirely okay to pray, “Lord, I really don’t like what’s happening here, and I don’t understand it. But I want to know You and understand Your heart.”

Your problems might get fixed. They might not. But one this is for sure, you won't ever be the same.

Perhaps you are reading this and you have wondered or doubted about your own salvation (or just plain know that you are not a believer), then I have a special word for you: *the time is now. Today is the day of salvation.* I'm not inviting you to pray an empty prayer or join some church down the road. I'm inviting you to realize the grace and mercy that Christ is extending to you, even as you read these words. No matter where you are in life, what you have been through or what you have done — *there is hope for you.* I invite you to accept that grace and call on His name. "For whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." He will save you from sin; indeed, He will cleanse you from your sins. He doesn't want you to wait. He calls to you now, "Come to Me, just as you are, with your filthy rags for clothes and let Me put a new robe on You." And then you'll be part of the most amazing story, the greatest journey in the history of time. That is His desire, that you know Him and walk with Him. And if you are saved, that is your destiny and the destiny of the Body of Christ.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> For more information on the gospel and what it means to "be saved," see Appendix C. Also see <https://thegospeltoday.online/resources/the-gospel/>.

## APPENDIX: Where to Go From Here

If you are anything like me, you are probably wondering by this point what this all means for how we “do” life in the church. What about giving? What about confession, repentance and restoration? How should the church be run? What about counseling in the church—what should be the goal and how far should it go?

There are many questions—almost an endless less of them—that we can ask as a result of our discussions. In this section, I want to give some thoughts on some of these topics. These thoughts will not be a full-blown answer for several reasons. First, because such an answer will begin to seem like a formula, and as we have mentioned, formulas are not the basis for which we are to live our lives. Second, because some of the answers will vary by community. People are different. Communities are different. Some prefer hymns and a very structured worship style; some prefer the modern worship with far more openness and flexibility (we’ll touch on that later). Finally, each of these topics can be dealt with in a book of its own (and many, if not most, of them have). It’s neither the intent nor the scope of this book to give such a detailed look. With that having been said, let’s begin.

## GIVE UNTO CAESAR

I start with this particular topic not because it is the most important, but because it is one that often draws the most questions. "Do I have to give? How much should I give? Does it all go to my church?" Those and many other questions often frame the discussions on this subject.

In discussing this question, first let me say that if your first question is, "Do I have to give," then I suggest you are approaching it from the wrong attitude and motive. The very question almost assumes an unwillingness to part with what one thinks as his or hers. The idea of giving in the New Testament is one of "get to," instead of "got to." The plain fact is that God *does not need your money*. I know that is hard for some to understand, but it is the absolute truth. God does not need our help, time, resources or money to accomplish His plans. However, *He delights in us joining in what He is doing, and He invites us to do so.*

Many base their giving practices on the Old Testament laws and principles of tithing. Yet, it is necessary again (as we did in earlier chapters) to point out that this law *was given specifically to Israel*. Even the curse spoken by God in Malachi 4 was against Israel. As we have mentioned, no Gentile (that's you and I, anyone not part of the Jewish nation) was ever intended to be under the law.<sup>33</sup> The real question, then, is "Why are we giving?" If we are giving simply to make sure we are

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<sup>33</sup> It is, of course, true that Abram's giving of a "tithe" (literally "a tenth of everything") to Melchizedek in Genesis 14 predated the Mosaic Law. However, there is nothing in the passage that suggests that it was meant as a law for later Patriarchs, let alone all of God's people. Indeed, such a gift would have been extravagant then, and the gift was given out of thankfulness to God for His protection. Again, the giving was based on Abram's calling and identity, not an external standard.

"blessed" or "living right," then we are back under the law that Christ died to set us free from. Why do we give? We give because of what Christ has done for us and the lavish grace He has poured out to us. No amount of our giving could ever equal what He has done for us.

How much are we to give? Is there a minimum standard? (That sounds a little to me like paying dues to be part of the Christian club.) There are several ideas in the New Testament that should guide us in our giving.

1) *Be generous.* Jesus instructed His disciples: "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matt. 10:8).

2) *Give according to your means.* Paul used the Macedonian church as an example: "[F]or in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints" (2 Cor. 8:2-4).

3) *Give as your heart and the Spirit direct.* "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:7).

It's worth saying here that *your attitude is as important as the gift itself*. Paul mentioned that we are to give "not reluctantly or under compulsion," but cheerfully. And Jesus had much to say about our attitude when giving. Consider these instructions of the Lord:

- *Come with a clean heart.* First and foremost, Jesus says that if our hearts are not right with another, we should first do what we can to be reconciled with that person and then present our gift (Matt. 5:22-24).

- *Give inconspicuously.* That is to say, don't make a big show of giving. We are only giving back a tiny bit of what God has given to us (Matt. 6:1-4).
- *Hold your possessions loosely.* We should not be storing up wealth here on earth for the sake of having wealth. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:19-21).

You'll note that nowhere in this has mention of set amounts been made. The reason for this is that it is simply contrary to the principles of faith. If someone tells you how much you have to give, then you are giving 1) under compulsion, and 2) not according to your own heart.

These ideas may well disturb church leadership, who may fear that "We won't have enough money to operate!" My answer to that is twofold: First, there is plenty of experience to show that when people give willingly and generously, with no set expectation, they give more. And second, isn't such a fear stepping outside of faith? After all, Jesus certainly taught that God would provide our needs.

## **THE ASSEMBLY: WHAT IT IS (AND IS NOT)**

Does our discussion of the law and the believer have any relevance on how we think about the church? I suggest that it does indeed. There are many questions about Christian assemblies that we could touch on, and as with many topics, they could each take a book by themselves). With that said, we will touch on just a few of the most common questions asked:

## Question #1: “Does it matter if I go to church?”

This is a common question, especially in the western society, which stresses individualism. Common defenses from those who ask this question are, “There are too many hypocrites in church,” “I get along just fine without those people,” “There are too many denominations to choose from,” and (one of my favorites), “God and I have an understanding about that.”

First, let me say this: *Whether you attend church is NOT going to determine your eternal destiny.* That’s right, you are not going to hell for failure to attend church. To say otherwise would be to simply put us back under the very law that Christ died to free us from. And it is true that there are many hypocrites (those that wear masks) in the church. And, it is also true that countless people have been wounded in the church. I was one of them.

Having said all of that, however, we cannot escape the truth that the church (representing all of those who have believed in Christ) was created by God, not man. The church is described as both the Bride and Body of Christ, and to disparage the church is akin to slapping a woman in front of her husband. If you have trusted Christ as your Savior, then you are a part of His Body, whether or not you attend a visible assembly. And as such, the Body needs every part to fulfill the call of God – to make disciples.

The fact is that God created no “lone ranger” Christians. The Body needs each person do fulfill their call, and each individual part needs the rest of the Body.<sup>34</sup> The writer to the Hebrews is even more emphatic: “And

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<sup>34</sup> For a discussion of this see 1 Corinthians 12.

let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb. 10:24-25). Attending corporate worship, then, has a purpose beyond a social, religious, or political gathering. It is intended to help each person, by encouraging the members and to “stir up” each one (put another way, to stoke the spiritual fire within them).

As with our last topic, it comes down to attitude. If we are saved, we have a new heart, and are part of a new family. We should *want* to meet with our brothers and sisters in Christ. If those desires are not present, or if we are simply going through the motions or being part of a church out of compulsion or because it’s expected, then I suggest it’s time for a spiritual inventory. I do, however, want to say this to those who have been wounded within the walls of the church. God knows your hurt. Unfortunately, the church, being made up of those who are still in process of sanctification, is still highly imperfect. Yet, man’s imperfections do not outweigh God’s truth and mercy. Even when we do not or cannot trust people, we can trust Him, and He will teach us to trust others. Do not fall prey to the idea that you can make it on your own, for that is the very person that Satan likes to snatch away from the flock.

## **Question #2: “What type or denomination should I attend?”**

The answer to this is both simple and complex. If the church of today was really like the church in Acts, the answer would be simple. Instead of “First Presbyterian,”



“First Baptist,” “First Assembly,” etc., there would only be “the church of Atlanta,” “the believers in Nashville,” etc. Of course those assemblies might be too big to meet together, so in that case, you would likely meet with a smaller group, perhaps close to your home.

Sadly, however, that is not the case today. So, let me give a few thoughts on this subject (again, no system or rule is being implied here). The bottom line of all the discussion to follow is this: *Go where the Spirit leads you.*

- *Consider any church that preaches Christ as Lord, teaches the Bible and upholds Biblical authority, regardless of type of government or style of worship.* Will you agree with everything that is taught? I doubt it. And, if you do, then it might be time for another spiritual inventory, since there are many doctrines within the church that simply don’t go together. I started in a Presbyterian church. I loved the people, and I knew they loved God. Yet, I did not agree with everything they taught (and still don’t), even though it was clear that was the place God had for me during that season of my life.
- *Find the style of worship that you engage in most comfortably.* Having started out in the Presbyterian church, I was immersed in the traditional hymns. I still love them. Yet, I also love many of the “modern” worship songs of today. And that means that the style of worship you prefer just might change over time.
- *Find a place of worship where you can identify and use your gifts.* I have been involved in many churches over the years. The ones I felt most comfortable in were those where I found a place to minister (whether it be in Sunday School, the choir, greeting visitors, or whatever). I cannot emphasize this point enough. Part of the reason we are to be connected to a local fellowship is to serve and minister, not just to sit on the pews and be spoon-fed.

- *Find a church that believes, teaches, and practices disciple-making, not just winning “converts.”* Seeing someone come to Christ is exciting! Yet, it’s only the first step in their journey. Jesus didn’t say, “Go and see people saved.” He said “God and make disciples.” A disciple is one who is like his master. The church is not an institution to promote social or political change. It is a spiritual organism charged with the making of disciples—a process that starts with salvation and ends when the believer is called home. Discipleship does not consist of programs or even good Bible studies per se. Discipleship focuses on relationships (relationships between believers, and more importantly the relationship between a believer and Christ).

I want to repeat what I said above. While these suggestions are, I believe, good starting points, they are not substitutes for the Holy Spirit’s direction. In fact, part of discipleship is learning to hear and obey His voice. I daresay that if the Church (and those who comprise it) consistently heard and obeyed the Spirit’s voice, we would be much closer to being “one,” as Jesus promised.

## HEALING FOR TODAY?

This topic has caused perhaps the most confusion and discord in the church more than almost any other. Churches have split over the issue, and well-meaning believers on both sides have been cast aside by the “other” camp. While this book can hardly claim to be the final authority on the matter, I believe there are some things that we can apply to this topic from our earlier discussions. To begin, we must look at the bare statements of Scripture on the subject. Before we get into those, keep this in mind: *The Old Arrangement has been set aside. The Christian is now under grace, not law.*

1) *It is clear from Scripture that Jesus performed healing.* In Matthew's gospel alone are numerous examples. This simply cannot be disputed (unless you are of the neo-orthodox generation, in which case that's another subject for another book).

2) *It is equally clear that Jesus gave His disciples power to heal.* This is found in Matthew 10 and Luke 9 and 10. Note that in Luke's account (in chapter 10, the sending of the seventy-two), they reported back to Him all the things they had done (apparently including the healings performed).

3) *It is clear from Jesus' statements that the giving of the Great Commission includes healing.* Note that the passage often quoted in Matthew calls His disciples to go out and make disciples. In Mark 16:14-18 we have essentially the same command, although expanded. In this passage, Jesus makes it clear that the "signs" are for "those who believe." Any suggestion that these signs were "just for the early church" is simply not in the text. It is also important to note that the early church *did* see these signs—including healing—in the midst of ministry.

4) *It is clear from Paul's teaching that healing is for the church—yesterday and today.* Paul taught that healing is a gift and that not all have this gift (1 Cor. 12:28, 30). It is often contended that Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13 signal an end to such things:

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. (1 Cor. 13:8-12)

These words are often interpreted to mean that on the death of the apostles or on the completion of the canon of Scripture (no one seems to be quite sure which), those gifts came to an end. However, there is no suggestion of that in the text. The text

indicates that the gifts were given until we all “know fully.” This will not happen until we are united with Christ in heaven. At that time, when “perfection” (or “the perfect”) comes, there will no longer be a need for such gifts. To suggest any other meaning for the text is reading into Scripture something that is not there.

To summarize, what we have seen is simply this: *Healing is real, it is for the church, and it is for today.* The question must be asked, then, “Why do people pray for healing without seeing it?” That is a legitimate question and one that often springs from deep hurt (particularly after losing a loved one).

Instead of trying to formulate some rule for why a person was or was not healed, I want to look at some other instances in Scripture that can guide our thinking in the right path.

### **1) The blind man of Mark 8**

In this account, some people brought a blind man to Jesus and asked that He heal the man. We then read:

And He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and when He had spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him, He asked him, “Do you see anything?” And he looked up and said, “I see people, but they look like trees, walking.” Then Jesus laid His hands on His eyes again; and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. And He sent him to his home, saying, “Do not even enter the village.” (Mark 8:23-26)

We must be careful not to make doctrine out of this passage. The only thing that we know from the passage for certain is this: *The blind man was not healed instantly.* Why? We don’t know, and to suggest any reason is simply speculation.

## 2) The lame man of John 5

In this account by John, we see Jesus walking toward the Pool of Bethesda. John writes:

Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be healed?” The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me.” Jesus said to him, “Get up, take up your bed, and walk.” And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked. Now that day was the Sabbath. (John 5:2-9)

This story seems rather straightforward: Jesus finds a man and heals him. Yet, consider this question: *Why was that man the only one healed? Why did Jesus pick him out and no one else?*<sup>35</sup> Again, we must not build a doctrine on speculation. The text simply does not say.

## 3) The blind man of John 9

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when

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<sup>35</sup> It is true that the Scripture makes no mention of anyone else who may or may not have been healed. However, when looking through the accounts of His ministry, it is interesting to note that when He was with crowds and they brought Him sick people, the text always indicates He healed them “all.”

no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing. (John 9:1-7)

This passage may, at first, seem somewhat irrelevant to the discussion. After all, Jesus and His disciples found a blind man, and Jesus healed him. However, take a closer look at this passage. Notice the question the disciples asked: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" They were still thinking in the Old Way: "Do right, be blessed, do wrong, be cursed. Oh, and if your parents sin? You just might have to pay for it."

Jesus, however, quickly corrected their thinking: "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him." Let's note quickly that Jesus *did not* say that the man had not sinned. He said that neither his nor his parents' sins led to his blindness. His blindness had a higher purpose: "[T]hat the works of God might be displayed in him." That answer seems, at face value, to be somewhat callous. I mean, let's be honest, we've already mentioned that none of us like suffering. And then, to be told that our suffering is being allowed by God for a "higher purpose?" That's a hard to swallow at times.

However, the honest truth is that it *is* all about God and His purpose. Remember that even Jesus suffered (and died) to fulfill the purpose of the Father. Jesus could have saved Himself, but He chose not to. Along those same lines, in answer to our questions from Mark 8 and

John 5, the answer is: *Jesus only did what the Father told Him to do.*<sup>36</sup>

Having said all of that, what does it mean for our discussion of healing? Again, let me stress, there are no hard-and-fast rules here. But, there are things we know with certainty.

1) *Scripture invites us to pray for healing – for ourselves as well as others.* Both John and James mention this in their letters. And we are not talking about a wimpy prayer that hedges your bets, like, “Lord, if it’s Your will, please do this.” As I mentioned in Chapter 3, I believe we are to pray in confidence and faith for healing, according to God’s faithfulness and our standing before Him.

2) *Scripture is equally clear that healing is up to God, not us.* While Jesus did teach to “ask, seek, knock”, He also taught that it was foolish to expect answers just because of your many words (Matt. 6:7-8). And, as I mentioned in Chapter 3, there is the matter of Paul’s thorn in the flesh. It is apparent that the issue – whatever it was – remained with Paul, probably for the rest of his life.

3) *Healing comes in many ways.* Some believers reject medical science as a means of healing. That is foolish. If all truth is God’s truth (and it is), then proper medical science and the advancements therein are ways God has given us to be healed. Even Paul had a physician (Luke) travelling with him (and it’s safe to say it wasn’t just for the company!).

As I mentioned in previous chapters, the issue really is about God and His glory. The proper question is, “Father how do You want to receive glory from this?” A related question is, “How are You using this to draw

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<sup>36</sup> See John 8:28, 42; 14:10, 12:49. Jesus consistently maintained that He did nothing of His own accord, but only as the Father directed Him.

me closer to Yourself?" Those are the real questions we need to be asking about this difficult topic. Admittedly they are hard questions to ask in the midst of pain, suffering and heartache. Yet it is during those very times that we can see His grace the most if only we cast ourselves upon Him. And as I said earlier, that is the essence of discipleship: Casting all that we are before Him, no matter what.



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