

*Bible Studies on Living  
in God's Plan  
Pathway to Purpose*

William Gibbs

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## **Table of Contents**

Introduction.....	1
There is One God.....	2
God is the Creator.....	4
God Sustains the Universe.....	8
God is Omnipotent.....	12
God is Timeless and Immutable.....	15
God is Huge But Personal.....	18
God's Timing.....	21
Is God Good? The Story of Job.....	23
God Arranges Body Parts.....	31
Jesus in God's Plan.....	35
God Foreknows, Plans, and Controls Everything...Almost.....	39
God's Plan Looks at Volition: A Warning to Unbelievers and Nations.....	45
God's Plan and God's Will.....	49
God's Plan Works "For" Us or "Against" Us.....	53
Election.....	56
Our Plans and God's Plan.....	68
Pleasing the Planner.....	72
God is My Fortress.....	75
God Creates Conditions.....	80
God Teaches Us and Guides Us.....	83
Flesh Cannot Please God.....	87

Staying on the Good Track.....	90
Faith in God’s Plan.....	96
Commitment.....	100
Concluding Remarks.....	109
Endnotes.....	110

## **Introduction**

There is no way to plumb completely the murky and mysterious depths of God's plan, but we have His Word to shed light on those things that God wants us to know. His Word tells us Who God is in terms we can comprehend, but the ultimate greatness of God is, of course, beyond the grasp of the human intellect. God does not expect us to perceive Him in His absoluteness. But in this study, as in all previous studies, we want to get as close to Him as we can, see as much of Him as He has revealed in Scripture, and know what pleases Him. And we want to discern as clearly as possible the connection between finite man and the infinite God. This study explores God's plan for mankind, the world, and His "chosen". We will ferret out scriptures that illuminate how God plans and operates from His eternal perspective, and what our responses to His plans should be.

I do not profess the scholarship, or have the vast time needed, to do justice to this topic. I submit my limited findings on God's planning processes with humility, accompanied by a prayer that you will find knowledge and understanding in these pages that will lead to greater wisdom on your part, and a stronger commitment to the God Who made us.

In these studies we will look at the qualities that comprise God's essence and scope; we will see God's goodness, wisdom, and power; we will see His plan for His Son, and how it affects us; and we will explore God's foreknowledge and examine how it relates to those who believe. Furthermore, we will see how our plans fit in with God's plan, how God's plan can work for us or against us, and the best way for us to understand what the plan is. Finally, we will probe some ways that we can participate in the plan...so we can benefit from it and be empowered within it to serve and glorify God. In a nutshell, we want to learn ways to *live* in His plan.

## There is One God

**False Gods.** There have always been substitutes for the real God. Throughout history, each culture and generation has had its deities, some visible and tangible, and some invisible and ostensibly “spiritual”. The many gods of all the religions and belief systems of the world have claimed to exist at the “core of truth” and have been presented as the ultimate reality of existence. With the secular push in the United States, many gods with no name, or at least with no connection to the supernatural, have arisen. We don’t even know they are “idols”. The big one today is money. Others include sex, people, competitive power, pleasure, entertainment, ownership, consumption, addictions, achievement, and many more. Forces abound that discount or crowd out the image of the one true God...and the living reality of His Son.

The presence and acceptance of false gods is a perennial issue for all of mankind. 1 Cor. 8:4b confirms this, saying, “We know that an idol is nothing in the world and that there is no god but one”. Add to this the second part of the next verse (v. 5b), and we have the picture: “...as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’...” There are many false gods. Yet our God is One, and He is *the* One.

It is interesting that the real God is the only one being attacked and undermined by the ultimate evil one, Satan. No other practice or belief system experiences more hostility than the followers of the Judeo-Christian faiths. This is true, even in America. Even though this nation was founded on Christian principles and faith in the Creator, it is now a place where faith is often downplayed, or even openly excoriated.

An upshot of this is that America will not be “God’s nation” forever. A nation can only be “God’s”, or blessed by God, for as long as its people embrace the true God, and no nation has a guaranteed future of security, apart from Him. This nation will prosper only to the degree that it expresses faith in God through the one Mediator between God and man...the Lord Jesus Christ. Otherwise, we will flounder and fall into oblivion, and God will bless another people in another place. We must return to the God of the Bible. He alone is God.

**The True God.** Jer. 10:10 expresses this very well, saying, “But the Lord is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King. When he is angry, the earth trembles; the nations cannot endure his wrath.” The living God. The Eternal King. We must recognize Him for what He is.

With God being so big, how can we sustain an image of His true greatness? We will see verse after verse that describe His infinite qualities, but our imaginations may weary. How long can we grip a perspective of His hugeness before we go back to bologna sandwiches and peanut butter and crackers? We are spiritual beings, but our bodies, with all their senses, are easily captured by and preoccupied with the corporeal and mundane, wherein we are

compelled to serve ourselves and ignore God. But we must open our spiritual eyes as widely as we can, to see this Phenomenon we call God, and then we must move toward Him.

**The True God Puts Idols in Their Place and Establishes Himself as God.** Ps. 82:18 calls attention to God's rightful place in our existence, saying this: "Let them know that you, whose name is the Lord—that you alone are the Most High over all the earth." God is unique and distinct. He has repeatedly distinguished Himself from other "gods", as we see in Is. 48:5, where He foretold events to show His difference from idols that were powerless and clueless. This passage reads, as follows:

Therefore I told you these things long ago; before they happened I announced them to you so that you could not say, "My idols did them; my wooden image and metal god ordained them."

The worthlessness of idols is further driven home by a stirring challenge given by God in Is. 41:21-24, as follows:

"Present your case," says the Lord. "Set forth your arguments," says Jacob's King. "Bring in your idols to tell us what is going to happen. Tell us what the former things were, so that we may consider them and know their final outcome. Or declare to us the things to come, tell us what the future holds, so we may know that you are gods. Do something, whether good or bad, so that we will be dismayed and filled with fear. But you are less than nothing and your works are utterly worthless; he who chooses you is detestable."

God challenges the false gods (who couldn't hear Him, of course) to do *anything!* He knows they can do nothing. This is the way it is with all false gods, even the idols that we have erected and exalted in our own culture, the things and people that we worship and count on. These have no *real* power. In Deut. 32:39, God said, "See now that I myself am He! There is no god besides me. I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand." This is similar to Ps. 50:22, where God warns against forgetting about Him, saying, "Consider this, you who forget God, or I will tear you to pieces, with none to rescue."

We must remember Him. We must acknowledge that God is God. Ex. 3:14 cites the description God gives of Himself, encapsulating His majesty, power, and timeless existence, by saying, "I AM WHO I AM." This nomenclature speaks for itself. Nothing can be added.

## God is the Creator

**Creation Trumps Man's Theories.** We don't know what existed before God created the world, but we know that God was there, because without Him, nothing would exist. We *believe* God created the world, but isn't it amazing how readily scientists embrace naturalistic theories of existence *without proof*. Yet they, and the horde that follows them, decry *our* faith, even though their position is *based on faith*. "Creation" is actually more soundly reasoned than their theories. A causeless and pointless existence makes *no* sense. Birds have feathers, fish have eyes, the universe holds together, and people breathe. These are results of God's creative and sustaining powers, not because of natural forces just "happening".

**God is the Creator.** It is in the *last* book of the Bible that we begin our look at God as Creator, and not—as you might expect—in Genesis. Rev. 4:11 says this: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being." God made them, and now God sustains them. How can we escape this truth? Heb. 11:3 adds this: "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible." This truth prompted the psalmist to say, in Ps. 104:24, "How many are your works, O Lord! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures," or as it says in Heb. 3:4b, "God is the builder of everything."

God's creation was not an "accident", or some lucky stroke on His part. God *planned* creation. Ps. 102:25 spells this out for us, saying, "In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands." God designed the blueprint for creation, and finished it with His own creative powers. This is not magic; this is God. He is the origin and end of all that is. We see this in Rom. 11:33-36, which says the following:

Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay Him? For from him and through him and to him are all things.

Here is what this is saying: God is unsearchable and beyond our ability to completely understand. We cannot fully know the mind of God. What is more, we add nothing to Him or to what He owns and controls, and we cannot contribute to His knowledge or power. We also see in this passage the *reasons* why we are unable to add anything to Him. These reasons pertain to the "all things" in the verse above, in the following way:

1. All things are from God. He is the source for all that exists.
2. All things are through God. He is the sustainer of all that is.
3. All things are to Him. God is the end and purpose of all that is and all that is done.



God planned creation, He sustains it, and it will fulfill His purpose for bringing it into existence. That's the plan. We can barely know it, and we cannot change it or undo it. Certain details and events may not be what God wants, but the **plan** surrounding all events is perfect, and the ultimate outcome will match His will (more on this later).

**Remember the Creator.** We look around at all that is, and we see our amazing surroundings and ourselves, but even then, we forget that it is God Who made us. Ps. 100:3 says, "Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his..." God's finest achievement is "people". As Isaiah said, "We are all the work of your hand" (Is 64:8b). He made it, He owns it, and He dispenses with it as He pleases. "With my great power and outstretched arm I made the earth and its people and the animals that are on it, and I give it to anyone I please" (Jer. 27:5). There is one God, and it is by Him and His Son that we exist, and that we relate to Him. 1 Cor. 8:4b-6 presents this clearly, as follows:

We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), yet for us there is but one God, the Father from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

He created the world, and us with it, and now He has *re-created* us in Jesus Christ. He gave life at creation, personally brought us to life at our births, and now He give us eternal life through His Son. For us the wonder of creation has become the creation of wonder. It is wonderful what He has done for us as His creation, and what He does for us now as His children. 2 Cor. 5:17-18 says it this way:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

**Why We Were Created.** We're running ahead of ourselves a little, as the tenets of God's plan will be discussed more thoroughly below, but the current of God's creation runs throughout His plan for us, and that plan has always been in place. We have much to learn about this plan, which culminates in our salvation...meaning not just our rebirth, but our final glorification. That is what we see in 2 Cor. 5:4b-5:

...we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling [body] so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

God made us for spiritual purposes, and for eternal life with Him. By accepting the work of Christ on the cross, we have been guaranteed a place in His family forever. And while our

feet are still on the ground, we are to represent Him in spiritual ways that bring honor to Him and fulfill our purpose for being created. Eph. 4:24 tells us that we are to “put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” We are to be “like God”. That is why He created us. But we have seen repeatedly in previous studies that frail man cannot duplicate the character of God...only God can do that. So the holiness that we were created for is that which He makes *in us*, when we follow the prescriptions for spirituality and maturity that we have studied already, and which we will study more as we proceed.

God created us for holiness, and has planned our good works to be done by His power and on His behalf. “We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 2:10). “Creation” and “plan” come together in this verse. We will have many things to say about this plan and our schedule for doing His will and works. For now, we are seeing that creation, which is enfolded within God’s plan, includes us at a very personal level. Is. 43:7 tells us why we are in the plan, seeing us as being among “...everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.” God made us for His glory, which we bring to Him as believers when we operate according to the techniques and methods He has given us for reflecting His holiness.

**God Will Provide For His Creation.** As long as we are here, God will provide for us, as He does for all His creation. He will give us what we need, to accomplish His purpose. In Luke 12:22-31, Jesus tells us that we should not worry about our lives, what we will eat or drink, because these are not the most important things in our lives. God will provide everything we need along the way, as we seek Him and concentrate on fulfilling the spiritual purpose which He has designed for us. When we mature and trust Him, all our needs will be met, and we will be furnished with all good things. Jer. 32:17 says, “Ah, Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you.” There is no way we can wrap our brains around this, but do you understand that the God Who created everything and sustains it all will have no problem providing for you? The key question is this: Are you seeking Him first, so He can (Matt. 6:33)?

**The Truth of Creation Beats Down the Lies of Pagans.** Paul and Barnabas were being recognized as gods among certain pagan groups in Lystra. They wanted to offer sacrifices to these apostles, but Paul stopped them with the truth, saying this:

Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them.

There’s nothing like the truths of the living God to crush the illusions of false gods. Paul called these false notions about fictitious beings “worthless things”, or vanities, or trash.

They are no match for the eternal Creator. Creation is our starting point for seeing and seeking God.

**Creation Calls to Believers and Unbelievers.** Our job now is to trust God and fear the one who created the universe and all its contents. Rev. 14:7 refers to a time when God's judgment will come, but this principle applies to us now. This verse admonishes us to fear Him, as we see here: "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water." Here is what we do with a Creator: fear Him, give glory to Him, and worship Him.

Because God's creation is seen all around us, there is no excuse for anyone in the world not seeking God. Rom. 1:19-20 makes this plain, telling us the following:

...since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

Creation speaks of itself to unbelievers...that God made them and wants them to come to Him through Christ. And it speaks to us as believers...that He Who made the world can certainly sustain and equip us here on earth for as long as He gives us time and opportunity to serve Him.

## God Sustains the Universe

**God is Infinite.** We have seen that God alone is God, and there is no other. And we have seen that God created everything that exists from nothing. Now we want to see the hand of God in sustaining the universe. The universe includes space, time, and everything therein. The universe is *not* unlimited. The only unlimited reality is God. God, Who is infinite, made and sustains a finite universe. We don't have to keep asking if space is infinite; it is not. We know this inductively from the following passages:

- Heb. 11:3—The universe was “formed”. Only finite entities have “shape”.
- Eph. 4:10 with Eph. 1:23—God fills the whole universe. You can't “fill” infinity.
- Heb. 1:3—The universe is subjected to man. Man cannot control infinity.
- 2 Pet. 3:10—The universe has a “make-up” or content, suggesting limits.
- Col. 1:17—The universe is a harmonious whole. Anything that is “whole” has boundaries.
- Rom. 11:36—The universe has an origin, so it is not infinite. It had a “beginning”.

And just to be clear, God IS infinite, as we see in the following passages, where we see the term “infinite” used to describe God's essence.

- Ps. 147:5—God's understanding is infinite.
- Eph. 1:19—God's power is infinite.
- Eph. 3:10—God's wisdom is infinite.
- Rom. 2:4—God's goodness is infinite.

**God Sustains Everything.** So God is infinite, while the universe we live in is not. We will see many other passages concerning the infinity of God before this study is finished, but for now we want to see Him as the “sustainer” of the things He has made. He created the universe, and now He keeps it operating by His wisdom and power. The only concession He made is that man shall have choice. We are free to choose. We can choose Him, or choose Him *not*. This concept is central to our understanding of God's plan, as we will demonstrate from Scripture in these studies. God plans and controls everything, yet we have free will to choose. How can that be? We shall see.

Our focus now is on God the sustainer of everything. Is. 48:12-13 leads off the discussion, with the following:

*Bible Basics on Living in God's Plan: Pathway to Purpose*

Listen to me, O Jacob, Israel, whom I have called: I am he; I am the first and I am the last. My own hand laid the foundations of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens; when I summon them, they all stand up together.

When God speaks, the universe stands at attention. He has absolute power. Is. 40:25-26 confirms this, giving us the following:

“To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One. Lift your eyes and look to the heavens; Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.

He controls the stars by His might, and sustains the earth and perpetuates life by the same strength. We see this also in Neh. 9:6, which says this:

You alone are the Lord. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.

All of creation is His, and no place is sustained without Him. What a lesson for us! We expect money or the government or position or networks (of people) or stone walls to preserve us. But only God sustains His creation and all that is in it. Ps. 95:4-5 says, “In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land.” All we can do is “bow down in worship” and “kneel before the Lord our Maker” (v. 6).

God the Son is involved in sustaining the universe, along with His Father. Heb. 1:3a says, “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.” This includes the physical environment we live in, because God controls time, seasons, and weather...as indicated in Ps. 74:15-17:

It was you who opened up springs and streams; you dried up the ever flowing rivers. The day is yours, and yours also the night; you established the sun and moon. It was you who set all the boundaries of the earth; you made both summer and winter.

**God Controls What He Sustains.** God sustains everything that He made and controls it by His infinite power, including outer space, the solar system, and the earth. He even determines the alignment of the magnetic poles. We see this described in Ps. 89:11-13:

The heavens are yours, and yours also the earth; you founded the world and all that is in it. You created the north and south...Your arm is endued with power; your hand is strong, your right hand exalted.

Do you sense the power, the overwhelming stretch and strength? As we have seen before, He oversees and directs the weather, and He controls the wind and the rain, all according to His design. This is depicted in Ps. 65:9, which says, “You care for the land and water it; you enrich it abundantly. The streams of God are filled with water to provide the people with

grain, for so you have ordained it.” Our God is alive and infinitely capable of executing whatever He ordains...or plans. In Him we can stand firm in strength and certainty. “The plans of the Lord stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations. Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord...” (Ps. 33:11-12a). Again and again, God’s sustaining and controlling power is trumpeted in His Word. For another example, look at Ps. 135:7: “He makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth, he sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses.” We must acknowledge Who holds the universe together and directs its course. This is no small thing.

Finally, God controls the timing and events of our births. Ps. 139:13-14 depicts how God’s creative powers are involved in forming us:

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

Nature is not amazing; God is amazing! It is not biology; it is the divine directing power of God that brings life to us, and sustains life once it begins. Job 12:10 says it well: “In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind.”

**Daniel Acknowledged His Creator.** Daniel recognized God’s greatness and power and gave praise to the Almighty Creator. Daniel knew well Who controls the universe. He said this:

Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning. He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him.”

What a list! In *Maturity*, in the chapter on “Gifts”, we cited these areas of God’s control, taken from the foregoing passage in Daniel:

- Wisdom and power
- Times and seasons
- Setting up and taking down kings
- Knowledge
- Secrets of the deep
- Light

We extricated from this that God controls technology, economies, weather, the working of the components of time (planets, sun, moon, stars), knowledge, governments, and light (energy), and concluded that there is nothing that He does not control. He made it, He

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sustains it. He directs it...down to the last detail. And then He gives us choice, and goes to extreme lengths to allow us to decide for ourselves whether to follow Him. There's the surprise. He is all-powerful, and still He lets us choose...this is the love and patience and grace we've heard so much about. Grace *is* amazing, after all.

## God is Omnipotent

**Our Limited Perspective of God's Power.** God is powerful beyond our imaginations. We see through our own eyes; we listen through our own ears; we think within our own brains; we feel inside our own hearts; we live within our own bodies. The ground-level prisons we're in restrict us to a narrow view, seen through the obstructive bars of human viewpoint. Mostly, we see only ourselves...we feel our own hunger, sense and express our own need for affirmation, and battle our own fears of extinction or insignificance. We are human. We sleep in these bodies, and wake to find ourselves confined within these corporeal containers. And God remains invisible. It is not easy for us to stay focused on a God we cannot see. Yet this God we have not yet seen is more real than all we see or hear or taste or wish for. God is a reality, albeit an incomprehensible and infinite One.

God calls for us to seek Him, to know Him, to trust Him. This is not easy, certainly not an automatic response to what we see from within our physical and psychological bubbles, but we are to look beyond what we see, and pursue the God that made us, Who gave His Son for us, and dwells within us as a Spirit. Yes, He is too big for our eyes. So we must approach this prodigious subject of His "power" with an admission that we cannot adequately describe it. All we can do is go to His accepted Word, the Truth He has provided for us, and quote God concerning Himself. Of course, in order to come to Him, we must accept His existence, and believe with child-like faith that both He and His Word are real and reliable. His *Truth* is the starting point for connection with God, and the place we look for understanding of His power.

God has spoken to us in creation, in His Word, and in our walks and talks with Him, but we do not know yet the extent of His power. Job said (Job 26:14), "...and these are but the outer fringe of his works; how faint the whisper we hear of him! Who then can understand the thunder of his power?" God comes to us with a whisper. The gentle and patient way in which He deals with us allows us to choose Him—not out of force or coercion (though the consequences for rejecting Him have been announced)—but out of a thirst for Him, and an acknowledgement of Who He is. His power has no limits, yet He deals with us in grace and mercy, if we receive it. (If we refuse it, gentleness may metamorphose into something else entirely.)

**The Extent of God's Power.** As we talk about God's power and might, where does it end? It does not stop at the level of the tiniest quantum particle, nor at the farthest reaches of stellar systems in outer space. And it does not stop with this world. His power and control are absolute, plenary, and conclusive. There is nothing beyond Him. This is not philosophical speculation. God is it. And there is no more. 2 Chron. 20:6 says, "O Lord, God of our fathers, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you." Nothing can



stop Him, and nothing is too big for Him. As Gen. 18:14a rhetorically queries, “Is anything too hard for the Lord?”

We can only wonder at Him, because He speaks and it is done, as we see in Ps. 33:8-9, “Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the people of the world revere him. For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.” In Matt. 19:26 Jesus said, “...with God all things are possible.” And 1 Chron. 29:11-12 adds this:

Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all.

We can't add much to that, and there's no need to break it apart. God is able to say these things of Himself, because He alone knows the extent of His might. God's energy, often referred to as “light”, is inhibiting, as we see in the following quote from 1 Tim. 5b-6a:

God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To Him be honor and might forever. Amen.

He cannot be seen...not yet...but we can know Him. He has allowed us to choose a *personal* relationship with Him through Jesus Christ, to make His “light” approachable.

**Nebuchadnezzar Encounters God's Power.** Nebuchadnezzar had to learn that God's power includes the ability to place rulers where He pleases, and that there is no such thing as a “self-made king”. In Dan. 4:17, Daniel made this clear to Nebuchadnezzar, saying the following:

...the holy ones declare the verdict so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men.

Nebuchadnezzar was taken off the throne for seven years, so he could learn that *power comes from God*. He learned that his notions about being the builder of his kingdom were wrong, and that God is the only One Who designates kings. Those in positions of authority and power are there because God places them there. Incidentally, our role is to honor the authority of those God places over us, and trust God for the outcome of our lives. He will decide who rules, whatever election or coup it was that put them there. As always, God is still in charge.

**Accessing God's Power.** We cannot discuss the power of God without applying it to our Christian lives. Every study we have done to date includes the concept that we are to access and give in to the power of God, so that we can do what He wants us to do *in His strength*. In 1 Cor. 15:10, Paul indicated that the work he did was done by the grace and power of God. This verse says, “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not

without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.” By accessing God’s power and strength...which we do by staying in fellowship, walking in the Spirit, praying, studying His Word, and trusting Him...we will be able to perform His spiritual work. That is how we produce the fruit of His Spirit. We do this, even though it requires great energy, because—when we are controlled by the Spirit—we *can't not do it!* With His energy, a pack of mules cannot keep us from doing the right and fruitful thing. This is not something we *feel*; it is something that just *happens* when we are Spirit-driven. (The only thing that can reverse this is our own choice to surrender control back to our sinful nature.)

In Eph. 3:20-21, Paul continues this theme, which is prominent in all his epistles. It is God’s power that performs His work and brings glory to Himself through us. He said the following in this passage:

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

God is able to do more through His power than we can ever envision, *when that power is working through us*. This happens when we are in His will and operating according to His guidelines. 1 Pet. 4:11*b* establishes this as well, saying, “If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.”

We have seen this over and over in previous studies; here are two more examples:

1. 2 Cor. 1:12—Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God’s grace.
2. 2 Cor. 13:4—For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God’s power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God’s power we will live with him to serve you.

We can know for certain that the God we serve has unlimited power to direct us and provide for us, so we can do the things He has prescribed for us. When we tap into His power, He can fulfill in us the purpose for which He made us, which is to glorify Him. But when we go our own way, and attempt to please God by our own flesh, or *care for ourselves* apart from God’s power, we guarantee our failure and disappointment. We avoid this by trusting in His infinite strength.

## **God Is Timeless and Immutable**

**God is Forever.** The timeless nature of God has to do with His eternal existence. Once again, we are confronted with our inadequacy to discern the true length of eternity. We have a finite view of things, and there is no stretch within our natural selves that will accommodate the infinite. Scripture makes it clear that, grasp it or not, God is truly forever...living inside and outside an aspect of his creation called "time". His eternal outlook comes from His divine experience with Himself, which extends far beyond anything He has made. He *created* time, so it is not infinite, even though we use such terms as "forever" and "always" in referring to it. Time gives us a way to measure our finite world, but time will probably end at some point, while eternity will go on...and God will be there, as He always has been.

Ps. 93:1-2 shows a contrast between creation and the Creator, as we see in the following:

The Lord reigns, he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed in majesty and is armed with strength. The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved. Your throne was established long ago; you are from all eternity.

This passage speaks first of God in all His timeless and endless power, and quickly switches to a consideration of things that He "created", or things that exist within the limitations of time. The focus then returns to the eternal perspective where we once again we see only God, the Creator.

This is the eternal sequence, then: First there is God, then there is creation, and then there is the eternal God again, along with anyone He shares His eternity with. But God is forever. Jude honors this quality of God (in v. 25), saying, "...to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen." Before everything there was God. Ps. 90:2 repeats this, saying, "Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God." From eternity past to eternity future, God is God; His life and kingdom are assuredly "everlasting". Ps. 145:13 echoes this truth, saying, "Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations."

As the everlasting God, He deserves our praise. This is exemplified in 1 Chron. 16:36, "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting." He is the "first and the last" and, as He says of Himself, "apart from me there is no God" (Is. 44:6). This is true for Jesus Christ, as well as it is for the Father. While He was among His disciples, He said, "Before Abraham was, I am." And look at Rev. 22:13, which reports these words from Jesus: "I am the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End." This same image is cast in Rev. 1:8, which says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, 'who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.'" The eternal tie and existential reality of the deity and infinity of God and His Son and His Holy Spirit are

undeniable. They are, perhaps, inexplicable in human terms, but they are, nonetheless, eternally true.

**God Doesn't Change.** God is immutable. He is the same now as He was in eternity past, and the same as He will always be. He is stability and perfection personified in a unique eternal character. We can count on Him being Who He is in all ages. As we understand parts of Him better, how He works and what He expects, we can have complete confidence that we have embraced qualities, precepts, and principles that will not change. Thank God we are not working for One Who is arbitrary or capricious...everything that comes from Him has been weighed with infinite wisdom, and there is no way to improve on His perfect plan. We just want to know it better...and that is the reason for this study.

Ps. 102:25-27 tells of the immutability of God (as well as His eternal nature), saying the following:

In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. But you remain the same, and your years will never end.

God *remains the same* throughout all the years, because He is “pre-existent” and “persistent”, the initial Predecessor and the final Successor. No wrinkles. No slow-down. No thermodynamic decline. God stays the same. And so does Jesus Christ, as we see in Heb. 13:8, which says, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” There is no question about God's absolute constancy and consistency.

Nothing can change God, or alter His mind or His plan. Regarding God's “changing His mind”, discussion is provided in *Being Devoted to Prayer*, in the chapter, “Praying According to God's Will”. (For a more thorough discussion of the misconception that *prayer* might actually change God's mind or will, please review the entire chapter in the *Prayer* study.) Here is an excerpt from that chapter:

Some events in the Bible make it seem that God changes His feelings or thoughts due to the attitude or conduct of people. His *planning* in eternity past was influenced by His future view of our choices, but what we see from God's engagement in our lives today is not a real-time decision-making process, but a series of manifestations of His plan. That plan was in place long before time and space came into being. His actions now are in the execution of His plan. We may see these as changes in people, in directions, or in earthly or worldly conditions, but these were planned long ago. We do not serve a fickle and time-bound deity; we worship the ultimate Creator and Planner of all that has been, or is, or will ever be...Who does not change.

Part of understanding God's plan is knowing that He never changes. In fact, all of the characteristics of God that we are exploring now will help us process the truths we will examine later as we consider God's plans...for the universe, His Son, His people, His

*Bible Basics on Living in God's Plan: Pathway to Purpose*

kingdom, and so on. We are presently preparing the ground for “planting” later in this study, when we get into the thick of the plan.

## **God is Huge, But Personal**

**God is Huge.** We have established pretty well the size and power of God. We will preface this study of God's' being "huge, but personal", with a couple of verses that deal with His enormity. Ps. 113:4 says, "The Lord is exalted over all the nations, his glory above the heavens." And 1 Ki. 8:27 (in part) goes one step further, saying of God, "The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you." There is absolutely nothing in all of creation that can surround or limit God, because He has no boundaries or dimensions or any other descriptors that confine Him to a space or a time. He is bound only by Himself, which cannot change. He is the eternal, immutable, boundless, holy God.

**God is Everywhere, But Still Close.** God is bigger than we can imagine, yet He is up close and intimate. He is not distant, even though He is "out there". Wherever else He is, He is still right here. Jer. 23:23-24 opens this view of the bigness, yet nearness, of God, in this statement, which says, "Am I only a God nearby,' declares the Lord, 'and not a God far away? Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?' declares the Lord. 'Do not I fill heaven and earth?'" There is an important point to notice here: God does not "come down" to us, or "go way out" to tend to distant stars...He is already there...and here. He "fills" everything in and around the universe, because He is everywhere. We cannot comprehend this, and many questions abound. But, as we shall see, regardless of His extent and size, He is very personal...a real Being that knows us and knows everything about us.

Deut. 10:14-17 introduces us to this infinite God that has eyes that see us and a heart that loves us. This passage speaks of God's love for the Israelites, which applies to us, as well:

To the Lord your god belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the Lord set his affection on your forefathers and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations, as it is today....For the Lord you God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome....

He is everywhere, handling everything, yet He loves us. This is unexplainable, except to say that He is God. What a privilege to be noticed by this King of kings! What a surprise...what an honor!

**God Cares for Us and Stays With Us.** He cares for us enough to stay with us, even though we have failed Him. Gen. 28:15 shows how God attended the descendants of Abraham. In this verse, God said to them, "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Even though He is above the highest heavens, He noticed this patriarchal family, and promised to watch over them. And He's still watching, which now applies to church age believers the same as it did to believing Israelites. We should always

remember this: Wherever we go, *He goes with us!* Deut. 31:8 assures us of this truth, saying, “The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.” This is a great honor and blessing...to have the attention and care of the Almighty God!

God is everywhere, yet He is with each of us. God does not live in a temple or a tabernacle or a church...He is in all places at all times. The closest thing He has to a “dwelling place” is within us, where He has erected temples. But He is certainly not confined to the space within us. He is in each of our temples, all at the same time, and is *still everywhere else besides*. This means that we can worship God anywhere, anytime. We do not have to go to a particular building at a certain time to pray or worship. This is not to say that believers should not gather together for teaching, praise, worship, and edification...certainly they should. But reverence and worship and praise should be ongoing events, because wherever you are, God is there, too.

**God Watches Over Us.** God’s presence in and around us, and our awareness that He is watching us should make us more cognizant of our actions and our attitudes, knowing that our sins are visible to God. His inspection of our behavior and thoughts is seen throughout Scripture. We give the following quote from Prov. 5:21-22 as an example of this: “For a man’s ways are in full view of the Lord, and he examines all his paths. The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him; the cords of his sin hold him fast.” Prov. 33:13-15 says virtually the same thing:

From heaven the Lord looks down and sees all mankind; from his dwelling place he watches all who live on earth—he who forms the hearts of all, who considers everything they do.

God watches and considers what we do. Much that we do does not fit within His perfect standards, so He has provided confession of sins as a way for us to beat our sinful natures and walk in His Spirit. This is His mercy at work, even though He sees the unacceptable things we do. Ps. 136:5-9 shows us His great love and mercy, even though He is the All-Powerful Creator. This passage says the following:

...who by his understanding  
made the heavens,  
*His love endures forever.*  
who spread out the earth upon  
the waters,  
*His love endures forever.*  
who made the great lights—  
*His love endures forever.*

*Bible Basics on Living in God's Plan: Pathway to Purpose*

the sun to govern the day,

*His love endures forever.*

the moon and stars to govern

the night;

*His love endures forever.*

God is everywhere; He sees us and knows us...yet His love for us goes on forever. That is mercy! Big God. Big love.



## God's Timing

**God's Timing is Perfect.** We see many times in Scripture where God has specified times for events and conditions to be manifested. God's timing is not the result of His being busy or not having the time to get to things that, to us, may seem urgent and in need of attention. God is never behind. His timing is a part of His perfect plan. He knows exactly when something needs to happen, and plans for it to happen at that time. And the time that it occurs is the *perfect* time.

Intercalation: This is hard to understand, but God's timing *is* perfect, as everything about Him is perfect. This is true, not because a *standard* has been applied to Him and He measures up to it, but because He IS the standard. Something is "more perfect" to the degree that it is more like God, or that it is done in closeness to God. And something is "less perfect" to the extent it is done against or away from God, or is "ungodly". When we start to assess perfection, we tend to start with the relative righteousness and limited wisdom of man. Where we should start is with God. When we see God's perfection in perspective, we will surely understand that His perfection alone must be the source of *all* good, and that nothing truly good can come from us when we operate on our own, because we are not perfect. Any perfection in us must derive from Him.

As we were saying, God's timing is always perfect. He has arranged the schedule already, and is playing out the sequence like a master fiddler.

**Scriptures on God's Timing.** Scriptures dealing with God's timing are delivered in the following:

- God does everything in His own time. In Genesis 18, God is reassuring Abraham that he and his aging wife would be having a child "at the appointed time". Gen. 18:14 says, "Is anything too hard for the Lord? I [God] will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son."
- God specified in His plan the time for Christ to appear, as we see in 1 Tim. 6:14-15a, which says, "...to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which God will bring about in his own time...."
- God gave Moses a promise that the plague of flies would not affect the Israelites, but that Pharaoh's people would suffer greatly with this scourge. God specified this as an event to occur *the next day*, a specific time, as we see in Ex. 8:23. This passage shows God telling Moses what to say to Pharaoh, as follows: "I will make a distinction between my people and your people. This miraculous sign will occur tomorrow."

*Bible Basics on Living in God's Plan: Pathway to Purpose*

- We all have an appointed time to die. Belshazzar's time came, probably earlier than it had to, because he had rebelled against God, prompting God to remove him. But God knew beforehand exactly how many days Belshazzar would be king, so God scheduled the precise time of his dying. The end of his reign was marked by his death. The message God gave in advance is recorded in Dan. 5:26, which says, "This is what these words mean: '*Mene* [meaning "numbered"]: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.'" He died that night.
- Even the spreading of the gospel is timed by God. God promised salvation to believers through the gospel. This was planned before time began, but was announced at a time specified by God, as we see in Titus 1:2-3, which says this:
  - ...a faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time, and at his appointed season he brought his work to light through the preaching entrusted to me by the command of God our Savior....

God's timing is perfect, and not something we should rush or be impatient with. Isaiah relayed a message from God warning the Israelites against rushing God. This is declared in Is. 5:19, which says, "Woe to those who draw sin along with cords of deceit...to those who say, 'Let God hurry, let him hasten his work so we may see it.'" Rushing God shows a domination of the sinful nature and a lack of trust in God's plan, and can only get you into trouble.

We will surely see God's timing again, as we move deeper into the woods of God's plans and operations. Timing is a *very* important part of His plan, as we shall see.

## **Is God Good? The Story of Job**

**A Question of God's Goodness.** When we look around us, we see uncertainty, despair, and suffering in the world. Even believers can have a hard time; in fact, it is possible that believers suffer more than unbelievers. Any glance at a news program will demonstrate the amount of suffering in the world. For the casual bystander, seeing all the suffering, and perhaps being told that God controls everything and that He is good, may have a tendency to question this. But there is more to this picture than meets the eye, as we will see from a look at Job.

**Job's Suffering.** When it comes to suffering and loss, who is the record holder among mortal men? It is Job, of course. There Job was, at his peak, tending his estate, being good, and living well in post-flood affluence. And then the bottom fell out from under him. In the ancient book of Job, the oldest in the Bible, we see a true story illustrating many of the doctrines that we have studied from the Word, especially those relating to suffering. We will use this account of Job and his suffering to help us see the goodness of God in the worst of circumstances. Some of the observations we will see come from Marvin Effa (Endnote 1), while the bulk of them will reflect our own studies.

The story of Job begins with Satan challenging God to allow him to demonstrate Job's weakness. God represented Job to Satan as a "mature" believer, and one who was customarily walking in fellowship with God. In Job 1:8, God told Satan this: "Have you considered my servant Job! There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil." Does this mean that Job was sinless? Maybe he was at the moment, but, as we shall see in more detail shortly, the general answer to this question is "no". Job was mature, but not perfect. In fact Job's attitude and behavior tell us a great deal about how even mature believers slip up, often in subtle ways, and then it is easy for them to cave in to the power of the sinful nature. Mature believers are more productive than immature believers, and they log more "creditable" time with God, but they are still "human", haunted by sin.

At the outset, the best advice for a mature believer who messes up is this: Even when you do bad...keep on serving the Lord. That is why God provides confession for us when we sin, so we can be restored to fellowship and get back in the game. 1 Sam. 12:20 sums it up this way, "Do not be afraid," Samuel replies, "You have done all this evil; yet do not turn away from the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart." This is encouraging, because we all sin. Even Job, who was the most mature believer alive at the time.

For God's own reasons (another discussion), He gave permission for Satan to go after Job. At the time, Job was relaxing, apparently at his own place, while his sons and daughters were gathered at his oldest son's house to eat and drink and enjoy some family time...something they did often. Life was good. Then the "bad thing" happened. Job's

livelihood was jerked out from under him...messengers came to Job in quick succession. Here is the sequence of events that depict how Job's life fell apart in all directions, almost instantaneously:

1. **Job lost his working livestock and servants.** Job's donkeys, oxen, and the servants tending them had been attacked and destroyed.
2. **Job lost his primary financial enterprise.** Fire from the sky burned up the sheep and shepherds.
3. **Job lost the remainder of his agricultural resources.** A raid took out all the camels and the servants that took care of them.
4. **Job lost his family.** Before Job could catch his breath from the previous news, another messenger came to tell him that a powerful wind had caused the collapse of his oldest son's house, and all of his sons and daughters had been killed.
5. **Job lost his health.** Shortly after this time, Satan was allowed to inflict painful sores on Job's body, from head to toe. He was sitting in ashes, scraping the sores on his body with a broken piece of pottery.
6. **Job lost domestic tranquility.** Insult is added to injury when Job's wife attacks him and tells him he should just curse God and die.
7. **Job is victimized by neighborly self-righteousness.** Here come the helpful friends. They have come to pity him. They sit with him for a week in total silence, and then they decide to advance their theories as to why Job is in such terrible condition. They dealt with him, of course, in "patient piety", as they coaxed him back to the righteous state in which they themselves lived (also known as "self-righteousness").

Take a minute to consider what God was allowing. He allowed all those servants to be killed, and all those animals...and the children and grandchildren of Job, so care-free, and perhaps counting their blessings...snuffed out, tragically and instantly. Out of the blue. Not to mention Job's suffering in his person. The question arises, "How can God be good and allow such things to happen?" Such is the viewpoint of man. We look closest to ourselves...at our lives, mostly at our physical comfort and material well-being, especially when these are taken away...and we focus on these, rather than on God. The story of Job shows how powerful our tendency is to discount God, especially when things do not go well, and most assuredly when tragedy comes.

Job had lost virtually everything he valued. And his friends were no help. When they came to see him, they brought their own earthly and fleshly views with them. Discussions went on for a long time between Job and his friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, but they were bringing no light to Job's darkness. One friend, named Elihu, had sat in silence. When he

finally spoke, as we shall see, he made sense...at last, someone was going to present a correct view of God.

**Job Questions God's Goodness.** Job was basically perplexed, because he did not think he had sinned. He implied this in Job 13:23, "How many wrongs and sins have I committed? Show me my offense and my sin." He did not see why God would be "punishing" him, since he had been "good". But we will see how Elihu helped him understand his misperception, both of himself and of God. Job had seemed to be doing well spiritually for a little while, and even told his wife, "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" But somewhere along the line, especially after listening to the first three friends' postulates about what was happening, he caved in completely. He questioned God's fairness and goodness. Even before this time, Job was not without sin, even though God described him as one who was mature and ordinarily in fellowship. But now, he was taking his last camel over a cliff.

**God is Good.** Before we go further, we need to establish one thing: God *is* good, and *does* good! He never does anything wrong...not ever! Look at what the Scripture says about this in the following quotes:

- Matt. 19:17a—"Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied, "There is only One who is good."
- Ps. 136:1—Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.
- Phil. 2:13—For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.
- Eph. 2:10—For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.
- Rom. 8:28a—And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God.
- Job 34:10 and 12—So listen to me, you men of understanding. Far be it from God to do evil, from the Almighty to do wrong. It is unthinkable that God would do wrong, that the Almighty would pervert justice.
- Is. 45:7—I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I the Lord, do all these things. [Notice the word "disaster", as the NIV appropriately gives it. Distinguish this word from "evil", as some translations have it. A bad event may be disastrous, from our perspective. But anything from God is not evil, as we will see in more detail later in this series.]

God is the absolute ruler over everything. He can do anything, but He is incapable of *not being God*, and since God *is* good, He can only *do* good. Most people think of God as some

mix of good and bad, but we have established from Scripture, even though Job did not see it at this point in the middle of his “disasters”, that God is *always* good.

**Elihu Speaks the Truth.** Elihu was the only friend that was dealing in correct information and a true perspective of God. He was trying to explain to Job that God is good (he was the one who is quoted in Job 34:12 above, saying that it is “unthinkable that God would do wrong”). In addition to the fact that Elihu’s speeches were correct, we know that he is the only one of the friends who did not have to make a sin sacrifice to God, after the time of disaster was over. That is because he was the only one who stayed in fellowship throughout the entire ordeal, and the only one who expressed the divine viewpoint.

Elihu corrected Job in several areas, as we see next. One of the points that Elihu made to Job was that Job should not say he had no sin. Elihu is quoted in 33:8-12a as saying the following:

But you [Job] have said in my hearing—I heard the very words—‘I am pure and without sin; I am clean and free from guilt. Yet God has found fault with me; he considers me his enemy. He fastens my feet in shackles; he keeps close watch on all my paths.’ But I [Elihu] tell you [Job], in this you are not right....

Elihu saw that it was a mistake for Job to say God was disciplining him unfairly, and that he was free from sin. The tragedy facing Job is not so much his *physical* condition, as it is his *spiritual* state. Job had been tested and failed. This left him in the control of his sinful nature, incapable of fellowship with God, and seeing his state from a strictly human perspective. In chapter 33:23-28, Elihu gives a picture of what Job’s correct actions and attitude should be, and suggests the solution to his spiritual problem.

Please read verses 23-28, where Elihu is setting up the solution this way: The “angel” we see in verse 23 is a foreshadow of Christ, seen as the “mediator” in this verse, and as a “ransom” in verse 24. Christ alone is the source of restoration (verse 25), so that Job’s prayers can be heard and answered, and so he can be “restored to his righteous state” (v. 26). Elihu is instructing Job to confess his sins to have his righteousness brought back. Job needs humility, confession, and prayer to have his walk with God reinstated. That was Elihu’s advice, and worth our taking note of, as well.

**Why Believers Suffer.** In Job 33:29-30, Elihu teaches Job why suffering takes place: “God does all these things to a man—twice, even three times—to turn back his soul from the pit, that the light of life may shine on him.” God brings suffering to us to turn us back to him and to enable His light to shine through us. The first implication is that we are returned from sin through discipline; the second is that we are strengthened through testing. This may not be clearly articulated in Elihu’s speech, but this is an application that fits. Suffering has a purpose to make us “better” as believers, whether it is to get us back into fellowship, or to bring us to a place of stronger faith through testing.

As for suffering for testing and growth, 1 Pet. 1:6-7 says this:

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

James 1:2-4 repeats this concept, saying the following:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Suffering is spiritual exercise and training designed to prepare us to face our battles *in faith*, or—as the case may be—to *discipline* us to get us to confess our sins and/or return to our studies. We described the reasons for suffering in *Walking by Faith*, in the chapter, “Faith is Strengthened by Testing and Training”, where we concluded the following:

So suffering is brought to us to 1) press us to confess, 2) prompt us to study, or 3) stimulate our growth by testing. This would mean, then—mathematically speaking—that two-thirds of our suffering is due to conditions we control. We confess by our own will, and we study when we want to. So we can ostensibly reduce our suffering by two-thirds if we consistently confess our sins and faithfully study the Bible. Any suffering that comes while we are consistently taking care of these two requirements will likely be designed only to test us, to spur our growth as maturing believers. This kind of suffering leads directly forward, whereas the other kinds (those regarding confession and study) just get us back on track so we can start moving again.

**Job's Failure.** If Job's suffering was for testing, he failed the test, because he concluded that God was unfair. Perhaps his suffering was to get him to learn that God is good. This would be the equivalent of getting Job to return to a study of God's Word. He listened at length to *wrongly-applied* information (even though much of it was technically correct) from three close friends, and sat through a diatribe from each one concerning the causes for his condition. This would indicate “negative volition” on Job's part, because he was not getting proper instruction. When he finally expressed “positive volition”, messages from God and Elihu were there to teach him.

Or perhaps Job just needed to confess. Job 36:7-12, spoken by Elihu, makes it clear that confession of sins is required for forgiveness, and that God may have to put pressure on a believer to get him to confess. Verse 10 from this passage says, “He makes them listen to correction [discipline] and commands them to repent of [meaning “confess”] their evil.” Then notice what will happen, as per verse 11, “If they obey and serve him [walk by faith] they will spend the rest of their days in prosperity and their years in contentment.” Failure to do so will bring punishment.

Assuming that sin *was* Job's biggest problem, what are the possible sins he may have committed before or during his meltdown. Here are some possibilities:

- **Fear** is disclosed in his statement, "What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me" (Job 3:25).
- **Lack of confession** and **pride** are seen in Job 33:9a, which says, "I am pure and without sin."
- **Sacrificing for his children** was a practice of the flesh and not God's prescription. This was something Job did routinely, as we see in Job 1:5b, which says, "Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them [his children], thinking, 'Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.'" He probably should have let them make their own sacrifices.
- **Loss of trust in God** was evident when Job accused God of cruelty, saying in Job 16:12, "All was well with me, but he shattered me; he seized me by the neck and crushed me. He has made me his target..." This is one of many negative statements Job made about God.

God's plan was actually working, but Job had lost sight of it, because of his spiritual state. He was blinded to God's purpose in his life. Eph. 1:11 says, "In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will..." We will see the "predestined" part of God's plan later in this series. For now, our focus is on Job's response to the "plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will."

Job missed it...and we must not. It is the heart and purpose of this series: He works everything out *in conformity* with the *purpose* of His *will*. God designs it, creates it, runs it, and gives it direction. "It"...is his plan. Job was part of the plan, and we are part of the plan. When believers suffer, it is because His plan is at work. This is not a time to doubt God...it is a time to trust. Unfortunately, Job doubted God.

**God Rebukes Job.** Following an accurate and scathing rebuke from Elihu, God Himself instructed Job. He told him then, which tells us now, that whatever happens and however we may see things from our perspective, God cares for the world and for all of creation. (See Job 38 and 39.) But Job is not getting it. So God has to rebuke him. In Job 40, starting with verse 6, God lets Job have it with both barrels. Here is part of what this passage says, as we see in 40:6-10:

Then the Lord spoke to Job out of the storm: "Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself? Do you have an arm like God's, and can your voice thunder like his? Then adorn yourself with glory and splendor, and clothe yourself in honor and majesty."



Job can't even answer God's questions. God is telling Job that he cannot understand God's viewpoint by looking at his own. That is the same thing God tells us. He gives us His view in Scripture, and we just look at it, and often look away, clinging to ourselves or the world for answers and solutions. And then we wonder why God is doing this or that, because we interpret life from the level of our humanity, and try to go on without divine wisdom, spirituality, and faith.

Job had been afraid of suffering, and it had come. So Job concluded that God, though He was basically good, may also be bad. And he ignored his own sins. If he had trusted that, *whatever comes*, God is all-powerful and caring, and is working all things together for good, his attitude would have been vastly different, even though the disaster may have been the same. And if Job had consistently credited God for doing only good, a simple confession of any sins he was struggling with may have averted the disaster altogether.

**Job Gets It.** Fortunately, Job does not end with Chapter 41, where God's rebuke of Job is registered. We have Chapter 42, and what a triumph it is! Job finally sees the light. God is good, after all, and Job has simply been mistaken. He had started with "what I feared had come upon me", and now he is going to see that his fear was an indicator of the way he had viewed God...as somehow not big enough or caring enough to take care of him. Job had failed to see that all of God's purposes are good. These are the purposes that we must understand, and that is why we must examine prayerfully and tirelessly the content and significance of God's plans. Perhaps we won't have to go through what Job did to understand what he finally grasped.

Job 42 (v. 2) begins, "Then Job replied to the Lord: 'I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.'" This is the pinnacle of all acknowledgements. Job concedes, not merely that God is God, or that He alone is God and there is no other, but that—because He is God—nothing about what He plans can be altered or stymied in any way. His plan is absolute, and will not be thwarted. What is more, *God's plan is good, because He is good*. Our role is to perceive God for what He is, accept all of life as part of His perfect plan, learn all we can about how His plan works, and surrender to His wisdom and power as He works the plan. God's plan is good: that is the theme of this series; and the upshot is this: We should be committed to the plan of our God.

Job realizes he has been wrong, saying in v. 3, "Surely, I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know." The first thing Job does when he realizes how wrong he has been is to confess, because he understands for the first time how God really works; verse 5b says, "...now my eyes have seen you." His confession in v. 6 is clear and strong, "Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." He sees that there has been nothing acceptable or lovable about him in his responses to God, prior to and throughout his disaster, even though he was a mature believer. He despises his flesh and his human viewpoint. All he can do now is "repent", or change his mind about his own wrong outlook, and give his failure to God for remediation and forgiveness.

**The Outcome.** The rest is resolution and celebration. Job assists his three wayward friends back into fellowship with God, and then enjoys his own walk with God. The cessation of Job's suffering, and the granting of unprecedented prosperity that followed, are events bordering on the "inconsequential" from a higher perspective, while the unsurpassed victory we see here is that Job has learned God's goodness, and that God's plan deserves his—and our—most faithful commitment.

## God Arranges Body Parts

**The Body and Its Parts.** The “body” we mean is the body of Christ, or the church. God arranges believers (the “body parts”)...as He chooses...to enable the church and its members to accomplish the mission He has given them. Specific spiritual strengths or abilities are given to members of the body of Christ, so that each one can contribute to the growth and well-being of others. God “gives” these abilities, so they are often referred to as “gifts”. These gifts come from God, and do not operate independently of fellowship with and ongoing faith in God through Jesus Christ. As each believer matures, he will exercise his gift to build up or strengthen other believers, so they can mature. Then the believers who were built up will in turn help others. This is God’s excellent plan. Unfortunately, sinful natures and the world and Satan want to spoil the plan, if they can.

Gifts, then, are given to believers. (For a more thorough study on “gifts”, please see the chapter called “Gifts”, in *Maturity*.) We do not intend to isolate the topic of gifts for complete analysis here, but will use God’s treatment of gifts to illustrate how the plan of God operates. There are a few questions we want to consider regarding gifts, including the following:

- Can God use gifts differently from one time period to the next?
- What is the basis for God deciding *when* to give gifts?
- What are the criteria for God’s selection of specific gifts for individual believers?
- What *quality* of God best equips Him to select the right gift and the right time for giving it?
- What is our main qualification for the activation of a gift?

**Are Gifts Temporary or Permanent in This Age?** There has been a great deal of discussion and disagreement as to whether all gifts are permanent, or whether God planned to introduce certain special abilities at the beginning of the Church Age and schedule their decline or termination as the Word of God was being completed. This topic was discussed in the chapter on gifts cited above. The conclusion in that chapter was that God is God, and that He can withdraw and re-introduce specific gifts for His purposes and on His schedule *as He pleases*. We are not dogmatic about certain gifts being temporary, although we can see the feasibility of the argument that they are. We have been clear, however, that no gift should ever be used in a way that upstages or discounts the truth of Scripture, and we insist that our primary and indisputable source of truth and growth must always be the Word of God as contained in the Bible. As far as we are concerned, we need look no further than His Word to be fed and to grow.

**The Involvement of God's Plan in the Timing of Gifts and in the Gifts He Chooses to Give.** Another consideration has to do with the *timing* and *choice* of gifts being distributed. In the chapter on gifts, we indicated that God has absolute control over everything, and that everything that happens is based on a predetermined schedule which He has put into place. God can give gifts *whenever* He pleases. The same principle applies to the *kinds* of gifts He gives. He can give *whatever* gifts He chooses. We will look at both of these: 1) the timing of gifts, and 2) the nature of gifts being given. God controls both. By understanding how God plans for the distribution of gifts, we may get a better picture of how He plans. That is why we want to consider the seemingly less-pressing questions of “when are gifts given?” and “what is the criteria for their selection?”

We see in 1 Cor. 12:18 the following: “But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.” Arranging the parts as He wants them is clearly God's planning process in operation. In context, this passage is discussing the ranking of gifts, which was based on a misconception that some gifts are higher and more significant, and some are lower and perhaps more menial. The point is being made that no gifts are “low”, because they are all part of God's plan. When He arranges gifts in a certain way, the arrangement will be perfect. We are to focus on Christ and not man, so that we can avoid harming ourselves by making comparisons, one person with another. When we learn to trust in God's plan, we will be content with our place in His mission.

God implants gifts at the time He has planned, and He chooses gifts that correspond with our level of faith, a condition He knows about beforehand. So God's plan encompasses both the gift and its timing...but notice: the PLAN itself is based on what He SEES in advance. He looks at us from eternity past and sees what our condition will be, long before His plan appears to us as a current event. He knows the gift that will fit our level of maturity and spirituality. God's plan was developed long ago through His *foreknowledge* of what our posture would be at any given time. Regarding gifts, they are given at the *time* His plan has scheduled them to be given, and in the *form* that He knows will be appropriate for us. We will be examining this aspect of the plan, and others, as we delve deeper into God's planning processes.

**More on God's Foreknowledge Related to the Gifts He Gives.** The gifts we are given are selected by God in eternity past on the basis of their ability to contribute to the health and growth of the church. These gifts are chosen for each *individual* as a result of what God foresees as the *level of faith* exhibited by that individual in his life. God anticipates the level of faith, and picks the gift that the faith will accommodate. My assumption is that the “level of faith” would not be seen as a “snapshot”, but in a broader view of the flow of faith over the duration of some or all of a person's life.

**Pride vs. Faith in the Operation of Gifts.** As for “levels” of gifts, no gift is “superior” to others. Some are more visible and have more apparent impact, but—regardless of the gift—

the level of faith determines its effectiveness. In discussing the level of gifts received, Paul told the Romans the following:

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of your self with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.

There is no excuse for pride in the operation of gifts. Pride is out, and faith is in. We have studied before that faith comes to us *from God* as we feed on His Word and go through the rigors of His training programs. But, of course, faith is also *our choice*...the product of many decisions over time to trust God and His Word. As our faith is built up through believing and processing Scripture, we will qualify for receipt or activation of gifts that correspond with the level of our faith. God knew in eternity past what that level would be, and designed for us the gifts He knew we could handle and work best with. So specific gifts come from His plan, which is based on His knowing ahead of time what our level of faith will be. Then, once gifts are given, a spiritual walk enabled by the strong faith of maturity will make us *productive* in the operation of our gifts.

**Being Worthy of Our Gifts.** 2 Thess. 1:11 says, “With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith.” There seems to be a dual application of the term “calling”. Our initial calling is to be saved. This occurs when God’s Spirit prompts an unbeliever to believe in Christ, based on that person’s seeking God, and his own desire to hear and believe the gospel.

After salvation, our “calling”, as we see repeatedly in Scripture, is to operate in love among fellow believers by engaging the gift God has given us. In a sense, we must be “worthy” of the gift. This does not mean there is something about *us* that is credit-worthy; it simply means that we will fulfill His purpose and draw additional grace as long as we are being prompted by our faith, and we already know that the strength of our faith determines the nature of our gift. When we have reached **maturity**, regardless of *when* we receive the gift, that gift will be fully operational and effective, so that “the name of the Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thess. 1:12).

**God’s Plan Determines Gifts; Maturity Activates Them.** We have established that specific gifts are given and timed *according to God’s plan*. There are many who say, with scriptural backing (e.g., 1 Pet. 4:10), that our gifts are given at salvation. I do not intend to refute this interpretation of Scripture. Receipt of the gift at the time one accepts Christ as Savior, however, is not all that significant, because the gift will not be operational at that time. The key question is not, “When is the gift *given*?” but, “When is the gift *activated*?” A great NFL running back was not placed on contract to play while he was still an infant. He had to mature. And a new believer cannot be expected to get into the real battles of Christian living until he has been trained and has developed a degree of spiritual maturity. So

the gift he receives, whether he gets it at salvation or along the way, will operate *dependent on his spiritual walk* with the Lord...not because he has the “potential” that the gift portends. No infant will call the plays...or carry the water. That comes with maturity.

I tend to believe that the receipt of gifts occurs *at the time God chooses*, period. He alone determines when that will be. It may be at salvation, or at another time of His choosing. But then the *operation* of our gifts will be predicated on our growth. 2 Tim. 1:6a says, “For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you...” This would seem to call for personal development and maturity, so that the gift can operate. The gift might be just an ember that will not flame up until it is fanned, suggesting that the gift will not be effective until it receives the oxygen of God's Word.

In 1 Tim. 4:14a, Paul instructs Timothy, “Do not neglect your gift...” Timothy's gift, according to the verse preceding this one, is to preach and teach. If he neglected it, obviously it would be because of spiritual slippage in his walk with Christ. He would be distracted in some way, and his own maturity would be in jeopardy. Maturity, the result of attention to fellowship and faith, are crucial in the operation of our gift. This would suggest that gifted service is the product of spirituality, which assumes confession, prayer, attention to the Word, and ongoing faith. Like all of the Christian life, the work of gifted service can only be done by His Spirit within us.

**God's Management of Gifts Provides a Good Example of God's Plan.** Here is the point of this look at gifts, as they relate to God's plan: God gives gifts based on His knowing exactly what each believer is going to do and think at any given time, and what each believer will need, either to give or to receive, in order to promote interactive cooperation and mutual strengthening within the church. God has “planned” the timing and function of each gift, as He sees fit, based on the relative *strength of faith* of each member, a condition He saw long ago. This is an example of how God's plan works...we will see others.

From our perspective as free agents, to whom God has given choice, since we know God has a specific plan in place, our *best choice* is to find our way into the *best part* of His plan, by faithfully growing in His Word and trusting Him every step of the way. This will equip us to 1) glorify Him, 2) earn rewards in heaven, and 3) become positive players in the plan.

## Jesus is in God's Plan

**God Makes Plans for His Son.** It is difficult to talk about Jesus and not launch a lengthy treatise on all the wonderful things He is and does. Fully exploring the role of Christ in the world, in heaven, and in our lives is far beyond the scope of this study. Our focus is on God's plan. We want to sample the role of Christ as it fulfilled the Father's plan. By touching on the way God planned Christ's introduction into the world as God/man, we will be instructed on how God does His planning overall. And we will show the way Christ responded to His Father's plan, giving us a good example of how *we* should respond to it.

Heb. 1:2-3 states the role of Christ as He carried out the plan of His Father. This passage says the following:

...but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

Jesus Christ did many things within the Father's plan. The biggest thing He did was to provide for purification of our sins by dying on the cross. Without this purification, we could not associate with a holy God. But with it, we are qualified to become His children. It was God's plan for His Son to create a bridge between God and man. Christ did this, achieving God's eternal purpose, as we see in Eph. 3:11-12:

His [the Father's] intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul stated that God's plan was executed "according to his eternal purpose." So the thing He accomplished in His Son is the thing that He had planned. Everything that happened in the life of Christ was planned...from His birth until He was seated at the right hand of the Father. God planned it all.

**God's Plan for His Son is an Eternal Reality.** Rev. 13:8 looks at the death of Jesus as something that occurred in eternity past. This verse says, "All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world." This makes it clear that Christ's sacrifice took place at or before creation. This view of time and events from the divine perspective sees the crucifixion of Christ as something that occurred in the timeless eternity of God's plan. God's plan of the death of His Son was so certain that, by its being "in the plan", it was already considered a completed fact of history...long before it was played out on earth.

READ CAREFULLY: God saw the time of Christ, as He sees our time, as an eternal existent. God sees all of time, and all events in time...all at once. Yet He can disperse Himself throughout each second now or ever, and into every molecule that exists at any time or anywhere within His creation. If He can't...and if He doesn't know every detail of all eternity, and if He doesn't PLAN every beat of our heart or each flap of every bird's wings...then what *can* He do? What is His limit? You know the answer. He has no limit. He is God. And that is the basis for His plan. It is...*His*...plan. So in learning about His plan, we must examine it in light of Who He is. Remember, He is God. When we get a glimpse of Who He is, we will be better equipped to understand His plan.

Jesus knew about God in ways we can't, but He related to His Father from the perspective of a human being that surrendered completely to the Father's plan. Jn. 17:24 specifies the time that Jesus Christ entered His Father's plan, which was before the creation of the world. It must be made clear that we are seeing the "humanity" of Christ in this verse, which says, "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world." The humanity of Christ and the acts He would do were factored into God's plan before He even created the world.

**Jesus' Commitment to His Father's Plan.** Jesus understood His Father's plan, and never deviated from it. It should be mentioned that we are treating God's *plan* and God's *will* synonymously at this point, but later in this series, we will see the difference between these two. God's plan and God's will are not identical, even though they are often used interchangeably. We want to take a brief look now at the submission of Jesus Christ toward His Father's *will*. Here are several verses that show this:

- Matt. 4:3-4—Satan tempts Christ. His retort to Satan: Live by the Word.
- Matt. 4:8-10—Satan tempts Christ again. His retort: Worship God only.
- Matt. 26:39—Jesus asks, "Let this cup pass," but says, "as you will."
- Matt. 26:42—Jesus says again, "Let this cup pass," but "your will be done."
- John 6:38—Jesus came down from heaven to do God's will.
- 1 Cor. 15:28—Christ is subject to the Father.
- Phil. 2:5-9—Christ humbled himself; obedient unto death.
- Heb. 5:7—Christ was heard because of His reverent submission.
- Heb. 5:8—Christ learned obedience through suffering.

By the time we finish this study, we want to see ourselves moving in the direction of this kind of commitment to God's plan. Christ was committed to the plan because He



understood it. This is what we hope...that we will become more committed to the plan as we learn more about it.

**God's Plan for His Son was Based on God's Foreknowledge.** Acts 2:23 gives a statement of the way God's plan was played out regarding Jesus. This verse says, "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross." We see a term in this passage that we saw in the preceding study dealing with God's "giving gifts" to believers. This term will be with us throughout this study. It is **foreknowledge**. You cannot see God as God and take away from Him the ability to know everything that will ever happen. We saw that God's foreknowledge is the basis for our getting specially-designed gifts at specific times, and we see here that it is the basis for God's planning the life, death, and resurrection of His Son. We are going to see that God's plan *in its entirety* is linked to His foreknowledge. In our next study we will plunge more deeply into the connection between these two.

**The Perfect Plan.** The verses that follow are presented almost as an appendix to this study. These verses give additional insight into the process of God's plan, as it is related to His Son:

- 1 Pet. 1:19-20—...but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.
- John 10:29—My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one.
- Heb. 10:7—Then I said, "Here I am—it is written about me in the scrolls—I have come to do your will, O God."
- Heb. 10:10—And by that will we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.
- Matt. 25:34—Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world."

As we have stated, God planned everything His Son did, including His death. This plan, like all of God's plans, is perfect. Jesus followed God's plan to bear our sins, giving us the opportunity to experience God for all eternity, simply by believing in Christ. We have certainly benefited from God's plan of salvation.

We will continue to chip away at the infinite mosaic of God's plan, and pray that we will increasingly understand how we fit into it...and come to know what we should do to live fully within it.

*Bible Basics on Living in God's Plan: Pathway to Purpose*

Footnote: For those who think we are embracing or advancing some view of determinism or fatalism, you will soon see that this is simply not true.

## **God Foreknows, Plans, and Controls Everything...Almost**

**God Knows and Sees Everything.** You will see shortly what we mean by “almost”, as it appears in the title above. For now, we want to be reminded of a particular quality of God: His *knowing*. He knows every detail of every event at every level for all time and for all eternity. God simply knows everything. We can't grasp this because of our own physical and mental limitations. We can be in only one place at a time, visually focus on only one thing, hear one thing, think one thought, and be in this moment only. We cannot do such things as time-travel, see the movement of electrons, teleport ourselves instantly from place to place, or absorb all knowledge...not even close. So we cannot conceive of a Creator Who has no limitations...Who exists inside and outside of time and space...Who knows and sees everything, not just things existing or happening now, but that ever have or ever will.

**Infinite God Gives Finite Man a Choice.** It is *this* God Who created us, and it is He Who has formed a plan. God knows everything, and on the basis of that knowledge, He has planned everything. It is His plan that is here before us, that we are in right now. And it is our presence in the plan that gives the plan a twist. Here we get into the “almost” aspect of God's control. This is it: God indeed controls everything, as we have seen already in this series and in previous studies, but He created us with the ability to accept or reject a relationship with Him. Man was created “perfect”, but with a will of his own...so he (meaning “we”) was born free to choose. And we started off by choosing *not well*. In the very first paragraph of the first page of the first study we wrote, we stated the following, which is seen in the “Introduction” to *Getting Closer to God*:

God is everything. He is the Origin and Reason for all that exists. We are dust...grains of sand...into which He breathed His life. He made us and then we promptly disappointed His purpose for us, which was to fellowship with Him. We were not His first disappointment. Satan departed first by believing he could become like God, then we followed by assuming we could know as much as God.

We followed Satan's pattern, because we intended to elevate and honor ourselves. We were able to do this because we had “choice”. God gave us life, and with it He gave us choice. This is where God's plan gets tricky...we have a seeming paradox. God made everything...God is infinitely powerful...and God is unlimited and eternal. He has absolute control over everything, BUT He has given us the ability to bring our independent choices into this universe that He created and controls. When we used our choice in the beginning to reject God, His plan had to “step in” to deal with that choice. Hence the plan...God's plan is mostly about dealing with our choices.

The resolution of the paradox is in God's planning “around” our choices. In His plan He has accounted for and accommodated every single event arising out of, or resulting from, every

single choice. He works His plan perfectly...interweaving it with each choice we make. This concept is phenomenal, and one we will be spending a great deal of time with before we are through.

We have choice because God *chose* to give us choice, as part of our identity as humans. Since He can do anything He pleases, He can certainly choose to give prerogatives to His own creatures. As a result, it is our nature to choose...that is how He has made us. And this is where our independence is most significant: There is within each one of us a predisposition which is, in essence, the “leaning” of our attitude toward God. In other words, we have a will to either seek God...or to live apart from Him. This self-imposed predisposition is called “volition”. This is the most intimate and basic condition within ourselves that prompts us to want God...or to want something else. This is the “unflipped switch” God has given us, to flip “on” for God, or “off” to bypass God. Our predisposition is a matter of *choice*, not a hard-wired product of creation.

Volition is what God saw in each of us in eternity past that has been factored into His plans for each person, and for the universe. “Choice” is ours, and—with man having the freedom to reject God—it is certain that some will, perhaps many. And some will choose God...God’s plan celebrates a positive choice. Volition is the beginning of our search for the true God, or our yearning for some substitute. Volition toward God will be positive...or negative.

For any reader who is saying that there is “merit” in our volition, or that this concept somehow reflects a false doctrine of “works”, please recall that faith is non-meritorious, from its tiniest seed to full-grown maturity. The merit of faith is in its object. No credit can accrue to someone, just for believing. Any child can do it.

**Only God Could Create and Enact Such a Plan.** God plans—and executes His plan—with precision. Is. 46:8-11 gives us a good statement of God’s pre-eminence as seen in His planning...a glimpse into His will and power and purpose. **READ THIS CAREFULLY**, as it encapsulates many of the things we are trying to learn:

Remember this, fix it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels. Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please. From the east I summon a bird of prey; from a far-off land, a man to fulfill my purpose. What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do.

This passage gives us a real snapshot into God’s planning process. We can understand from this that God has made plans in the past, and that what He plans, happens. His actions follow His plan exactly. And He (alone) is the planner. Acts 15:18 adds to this, saying, “...says the Lord, who does these things, known to the Lord for ages is his work.” This connects with Is. 45:21, which says this:

Declare what is to be, present it—let them take counsel together. Who foretold this long ago, who declared it from the distant past? Was it not I, the Lord? And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me.

What God says of Himself stands, and this is absolute: There is one God. The infinite power behind this singular and great God is seen in a passage from the Psalms which shows again the strength and firmness of His plan, as follows:

The Lord foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. But the plans of the Lord stand firm forever [never changing], the purposes of his heart through all generations. Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people he chose for his inheritance. From heaven the Lord looks down and sees all mankind; from his dwelling place he watches all who live on earth—he who forms the hearts of all, who considers everything they do. No king is saved by the size of his army; no warrior escapes by his great strength. A horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength it cannot save. But the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love.... (Ps. 33:10-18)

**God's Insight and Foreknowledge Feed Into His Plan.** Ps. 139:1-4 gives us an excellent look at God's infinite insight and foreknowledge. This passage says the following:

O, Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord.

What a profound acknowledgement of God's foresight and oversight. God is everywhere, and sees everything we say or do or think...before we do it. Verse 16b in this psalm (still in ch. 139) sees God's plan as a "book" that has already been written. Our story has been told. This passage says, "All the days ordained for me were written in your [God's] book before one of them came to be." So there is a "Word of God", but there is also a "book" kept by God, which is His plan. The only way to understand the *book* is to learn the *Word*, which is the reason for this writing. God plans for us and around us. It is all known to Him, and He controls all of it, except our choices, which His plan encompasses without removing our freedom.

**Participating in God's Plan.** In verses 23 and 24, still in Ps. 139, we get a first look at one of the ways we participate profitably in God's plan. This passage says, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." The psalmist is asking God to expose his sins, such as anxiety, so he can recognize them and admit them to God. This will enable him to *follow God's plan*. We're reading between the lines a little here, but the principle stands, as we have seen well from other studies and passages: When we confess our sins, we can enjoy fellowship with God and get His guidance...and His

empowerment...to live the Christian life. He will lead us in His “everlasting way”...or guide us in His plan. We will see more about getting God’s guidance later in this series.

**A Path Well Planned Makes for a Path Well Chosen.** Is. 48:3 says, “I foretold the former things long ago, my mouth announced them and I made them known; then suddenly I acted, and they came to pass.” The process is clear: God created His plan in eternity past, and is now executing it. The span of our physical lives is a tiny slice of that plan. God’s plan is old, whereas events in our lives are current and immediate. We are capable of experiencing the immediate, but God’s experience encompasses the immediate *and* the infinite. We are trying to find a way to grasp and live in a plan with infinite dimensions. That is our challenge.

A paragraph from the “Summary” in *Being Devoted to Prayer* explains to some degree how we fit into God’s plan. Here is what was said:

A final inscription had to do with God’s plan. He controls everything, and has planned every single event in time and eternity. He intersperses His control and manipulation of occurrences around our choices, not as real-time *responses* to our free-will decisions, but as part of a grand plan that He designed in eternity past to work around us and still sustain His will. We *choose* in real time, but the plan working around our choices was put together before the universe was formed.

We are in God’s infinite plan, yet we are free to live and choose. God controls everything, but even as His adopted children, we choose each day whether to follow Him or not. It is hard to get the perspective. When we step back and recognize our place, we see that we are small at an infinitesimal level...and God is limitless. The only proper role for us is to recognize His power, and choose Him. The appropriate response of Christians to God’s plan will surely be one of fear and reverence.

It is worth repeating: God controls everything. 2 Ki. 19:25a says, “Have you not heard? Long ago I ordained it. In days of old I planned it; now I have brought it to pass...” It is all His. He knows each event beforehand, He plans every detail, and we are living in the enactment of His plan. But still the pressure to choose endures.

Here is the point: Knowing that God is in control does not mean we can sit back and ignore our *responsibilities* to make good choices...to confess and pray and learn His Word...and trust Him...in order to *love* Him and see the fruit of His Spirit produced through us. We are free, but we are commanded to mature and beat sin and draw near to God and walk in faith and in His Spirit. And we are responsible for choosing His path over ours.

**The Responsibility for Choosing Well.** We are the ones who choose God. He waits for us, and does not force Himself or His techniques directly onto us. He doesn’t hold us over a cliff and scream at us, “Pray!” Nor does He hold a knife to our throat and demand of us, “Confess!” Nor does He body slam us to the floor and force us to focus our eyes on His Book, so that He can force-feed us with spiritual nourishment. No. God patiently lets us

choose, and even His discipline is not what we deserve. God invites us, and trains us, but He does not “force” believers to choose Him as part of their daily lives.

When we say “He gave us choice”, we mean just that. WE CHOOSE! When we pray for someone, and ask God to “strengthen” them, or “open their eyes to the truth”, we must understand that God will not go into their minds and change them. Change will only come as a result of *their* decisions to embrace the procedures God has designed for them. God will not choose Himself...*for* them; they must choose Him...*for* themselves. God has chosen to make Himself “contingent”, and He will not change someone without that person’s consent. Of course, when we *surrender* to Him, we *choose* to give Him complete access, in which case He DOES influence us (e.g., Phil. 2:12-13).

When we pray the “prayer of faith” (See the chapter, “Prayer of Faith”, in *Being Devoted to Prayer*), we know that we are praying for the thing that God wants to give or do, and that He will do what we ask, because we are praying according to His will. But when we pray for someone, or even for ourselves, we do so knowing this: God will not violate someone’s right to choose, and will work only with *external* conditions to bring about the change we are asking for, unless their *internal* condition permits Him access.

External conditions include everything but the heart (“heart” referring to soul/mind/spirit); this means God can work on the “body” as part of the process of influencing a person’s direction. The brain is part of the body, so He can also heal or strengthen the “brain” at a cellular level, as part of His plan. But get this: God will not overpower one’s soul to force or push decisions. It seems odd, but God “respects” our choices. Since He has given us free will, even though He is in absolute control of everything, the only conclusion that we can make is that He has disempowered Himself as far as controlling our choices. He is powerful enough to deliberately limit Himself. On the other hand, if we *choose* Him, His power will have free reign in us.

God is not far away, since He lives within us, but He is like the King who comes to be our guest...He is always a perfect gentleman, and He will not interfere with our “free choice”. Ah...how nice. But there’s a barb here, for anyone who thinks we are “free” from culpability. The stinger is that we are 100% responsible for *choosing God*. When we pray for ourselves, we must look at ourselves and ask, “What are the choices that I am making that reflect that I value God, and that I want to be closer to Him?” If we are not choosing Him, we are *responsible* for that choice, and our prayers for supplies will have no impact. And when we pray for others, we must do so with the realization that the things we are asking concerning them might only be done externally, because *they decide* what to make of God in their lives, and they are 100% responsible for their choices. God has given us the freedom to choose, but we are fully accountable for our choices.

**Recapitulation.** This chapter is pivotal in our discussion of God’s plan, and we must not miss what has been said here. A simple outline may help us frame the concept of God’s plan. Here are the “givens” we have established from God’s Word:

1. **God controls everything** through His infinite power and by His unlimited wisdom. Dissenters? There can be none. We have seen this repeatedly in the scriptures.
2. **Man has been given free will.** Thus we have the principle of “whoever will”, as it is disclosed in the following quotes from Scripture:
  - Rev. 22:17—The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come!” Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.
  - Rom. 10:13—...for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.
  - Jn. 3:16—For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.
  - Mk. 8:34—If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.
  - Joel 2:32—And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.
  - Joshus 24:15<sup>a</sup>—But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you [due to negative volition], then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve....

**Conclusion.** We see that there are two seemingly exclusive conditions that exist at the same time: 1) God's control of everything, and 2) our ability to choose independently of God. But we must be clear that these are *not* separate or exclusive...they must be shuffled into one huge deck that we call “creation”. This is why His plan must be interspersed with our free will...because both are true at the same time. He decided to give us free will, which we cannot dispute or question. It then fell to Him as the Creator to make a plan that keeps Him in charge of everything, while still allowing us to choose freely. God's control and our freedom must work concomitantly and simultaneously...they must coexist and interact seamlessly in perpetual accompaniment. God's plan enables His control to remain and our freedom to operate, because God is big enough to accomplish one, while allowing the other. Under all circumstances, we acknowledge that *God* is in control of everything, and *we* are responsible for choosing God.



## **God's Plan Looks at Volition: A Warning to Unbelievers and Nations**

**God Foreknows Our Desire for Him.** God saw from eternity past those who wanted contact with Him...those who would choose Him over other alternatives. Rom. 11:2*a* tells us that the people God “foreknew” would assuredly be accepted. This passage says, “God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew.” In this passage Paul is talking about Jews, who largely rejected Jesus Christ as the Messiah. But certain Jews were (and still are) being saved, because they accepted Christ...and God knew about each of these well in advance. He did not reject those whom He knew were going to believe in His Son.

**Interest in Choosing God Sends a Signal to Him.** There is a condition within each of us that is almost intrinsic...it is our attitude toward God. I say “almost”, because conditions that are intrinsic are inherent or innate...we are born with them. Our response to our awareness of God is so personal and so uniquely our own that it has the flavor of an inherited trait or quality. But it is not ours as a birthright, nor is it instilled in us as a product of God's creation. This desire or searching or craving for the true God is something we individually, independently *choose*, as a result of that kernel of faith that looks at life and says, “There is a God.” We want more: to know about Him, to find Him, to relate to Him. God sees this interest, and He will see to it that we get the gospel, wherever we are, so we can exercise non-meritorious faith in Christ, and be saved.

God invites us from the time of our earliest self-awareness to seek Him. In 2 Chron. 15:2*b*, we see God's open door for those who seek Him. This passage says, “The Lord is with you when you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you.” The opposite is also true: if we reject God, we will not find Him. And if we persist in rejecting Him, we will not get the gospel, or—if we do hear it, we will not respond to it—and we will be condemned because of unbelief. In Rom. 11:23, which refers to Jews again, God says the only thing that keeps them out is “unbelief”. This verse says, “And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again.” Unbelief comes from “negative volition” and prevents one from being saved and having a relationship with God. And negative volition is the first thing God saw in eternity past, when He assessed our lives and our path choices toward salvation...or toward condemnation. And He could only watch and plan around these choices.

He allows us to reject Him, to *not* choose him. He allowed Pharaoh to “harden his heart”, as we see in Ex. 9:34, “When Pharaoh saw that the rain and hail and thunder had stopped, he sinned again: He and his officials hardened their hearts.” And then notice what happened in Ex. 14:8, after Pharaoh's repeated rejection of God, “God hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, so that he pursued the Israelites, who were marching out boldly.” Pharaoh kept refusing God's requests of him, until finally God sealed the deal by permanently

conceding the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. In Rom. 1:28 we see the conditions that will cause God to permanently release someone to condemnation. This verse says, "Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God [in context, "to exercise positive volition"], he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done." The second part of verse 2 in the next chapter (ch. 2) follows this by saying, "...God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth." Rejection of God incurs His eternal judgment.

There is no excuse for rejecting God. Those who reject God (meaning "those who exercise negative volition toward Jesus Christ") will be condemned (Jn 3:18). This is not what God wants. Rom. 1:18-20 tells the whole story about the opportunities God gives people to express positive volition. Here is what this passage says:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

God's creation that surrounds us screams His presence as the Almighty Creator! Even his nature and power can be seen in all we have before us. And yet, for many, this is not enough. It seems that the amazing discoveries of science become opportunities for extolling those who find them, rather the One Who created them. We have life, and we see creation, and yet we have the arrogance to say that it is not astounding...it's just the result of natural occurrences. This is the blindness of negative volition. And this is what God saw in eternity past, when He began to plan the distribution of His gospel and truth. He saw volitions, positive and negative. He knew where truth needed to go...where it would be received. And we must be clear: God is under no obligation to get the gospel to anyone with *negative* volition, or to anyone God knows has already rejected Him.

**God Plans and Plants Nations Based on His Foreknowledge.** God looked down the corridors of eternity future, and saw which people would have positive volition, and which would have negative volition. He arranged national boundaries to accommodate the volitions He "foresaw". He was able to group people into areas of the planet so that those with positive volition tended to cluster, and the others were scattered or distributed to suit His purpose. This is why nations who have embraced Christianity have generally been identified as nations of "believers", even though that condition can drift...a Christian nation can become a pagan one.

God creates boundaries to provide an accommodation of positive volition and to give seekers of God maximum opportunity to hear the gospel. Acts 17:26-27 depicts this very well, as follows:

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From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him [exercise positive volition] and perhaps reach out for him [hear the gospel] and find him [believe in Christ], though he is not far from each one of us.

God knows who will believe, and has structured His plan around this foreknowledge. Deut. 32:6b-8 confirms that God plans nations and boundaries around volitional conditions, as follows:

Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you? Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you. When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples according to the number of the sons of God.

What this means to us is that God sets up national boundaries for people according to their identity with Him. Nations will be secure or be in jeopardy based on the number of believers who live there. This is part of God's plan. As an application of this, we should pray that this nation will see a renewal of its own faith and commitment, and that a large number of people will exercise positive volition by seeking God, finding Christ, and living by the power of the Spirit. That would be nice.

**God Watches the Nations.** Ps. 66:7 says, "He rules forever by his power, his eyes watch the nations—let not the rebellious rise up against him." He is controlling the flow of national power throughout the world. Sometimes, this manipulation of nations conjures up an image of someone maneuvering chess pieces on a checkerboard. 1 Ki. 19:15-17 gives an example of the way God moves the players on *His* board:

The Lord said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu.

Does this make your head spin? Yet this is simple and minor, compared to all the complex international configurations that God deals with. He is powerful and can blow rulers off the stage like dust. Is. 40:21-24 illustrates this, as follows:

Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded? He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in. He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. No sooner are they planted, no

*Bible Basics on Living in God's Plan: Pathway to Purpose*

sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

This is just another example of God's control. But we have seen from this study that, with all His governance and management of the affairs of the universe, and of its people, He leaves one place where He relinquishes control: the volition of man. We have free will. And His plan works around that will. God can crush us into oblivion, but, as we stated earlier, He respects our choices. He may prod us, as we will see later, but He does not FORCE us to choose. He works beside us, and gives us every chance as believers to exercise positive volition toward Him...every second of every day...just as you are doing right now by reading this study.

## God's Plan and God's Will

**Distinguishing God's Plan from God's Will.** God's plan and God's will are not the same thing. We are pretty current on the parameters of God's plan, but it has been awhile since we have looked closely at God's will...so we will take time to refresh ourselves on scriptures that acquaint us with this topic. Then we will distinguish the difference between the plan of God...and His will.

**Parameters of God's Will.** We have studied before the things that Scripture says about God's will. We will conduct here a brief review of these things.

Ps. 115:3 says, "Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him." If He wants to do something, He does it. As Jesus was teaching His disciples to pray, He said in His prayer, "Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven." Jesus was praying that God's will might be accomplished on earth, but then adds..."as it is in heaven." The implication is clear: God's will *is* being done in heaven, and *can* be done on earth.

Paul instructed the Ephesians to learn God's will, as we see in Eph. 5:15-17, which says, "Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is." He prayed that the Colossians would do this, as well, saying to them in Colossians 1:9:

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

This is why Paul told the Ephesians, in Acts 20:27, "For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God." Paul knew the need for us to learn God's Word, so we can have knowledge of God's will which will, in turn, enable us to *do* it. Heb. 13:20-21 sums this up nicely, as follows:

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

When we are equipped to do His will, the next step is for God to "work in us what is pleasing to him." We must never forget that the accomplishment of God's will is what He does *through* us, because we follow His commands to walk in His power and by His wisdom. This is pivotal in doing His will: *He does it... through us.*

To fully know and understand the will of God, we must remove the trash of fleshly and worldly viewpoint, by replacing it with Scripture. Rom. 12:2 concludes this, as follows:

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

By understanding God's "way", we are enabled to get new minds...new viewpoint...concerning life and God's will. When we operate from the perspective of God's viewpoint, we will subject our will to His, and integrate His preferences into every decision we make. We see this taking place in James 4:13-15, where we are told to factor God's will into all of our plans. Here is what this passage says:

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."

What God *wants* is what we must *know* so we can *do* what He *wants*. Everything we have written in previous studies dealt with *knowing* what He *wants*. We *study* to see what to *do*. (For additional information concerning God's will, including its nuances in our lives, please refer to the chapter, "God's Will", in *Getting Closer to God*.)

**Distinguishing God's Plan and God's Will.** We stated it above: God's plan and God's will are two different things. For example, it is God's will that all people be saved. This is stated clearly in 2 Pet. 3:9, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise [to return], as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." God is delaying His second coming to allow every single person with positive volition the opportunity to accept Christ. That is because He **WANTS** everyone to be saved. But *will* everyone be saved? No. And we know why: because He has given us the prerogative to reject Him, and many do. But God has also planned for everyone who *wants* Him to be able to *choose* Him.

This is starting to crystallize for us: It is God's *will* that all be saved, but not everyone will be; so it is His *plan* that all who *seek* Him will *find* Him through His Son. It is also God's *will* that all who *accept* Christ will *live righteously* and exhibit the character of Christ, leaving behind sinful tendencies and practices. But few of us actually do this. So it is His *plan* to offer a way—for believers who choose it—to live righteously. There are two groups, then, who are *not* making right choices: 1) those who never believe in Christ, and 2) believers who do not pursue God's methods for conforming to the image of Christ. The conclusion: God's will is not always done.

So God has made a plan that fits around the choices of fallen...and fallible...man. God's plan is shaped to *cause* conditions that He prefers, and to *work around* those He doesn't, so that His will can be satisfied as much as possible without taking away man's free will. Such is the nature of God's decision to offer autonomy to His created beings. His will has been adjusted to fit His plan, so His will now is that His plan will be fulfilled. Ironically, His plan

will ultimately fulfill His will, when His nature is eventually satisfied by the outcome of His plan. Keeping up?

So, when we look at situations in life or in the world, we can only say, “God’s will be done”, and acknowledge that God’s perfect plan is being played out. As for this being a kind of “determinism” or “fatalism” or *fait accompli*, we will now comment. There can be no doubt that God’s plan is fixed and running, but it is also true that we are free to choose, and are responsible for our choices. What’s more: We cannot escape the inevitability of choosing. We *must choose*, as existentialists would say, and we *will* assume responsibility for our choices. This differs from fatalism in that we have choice and responsibility, whereas in fatalism, one simply goes along with an inevitable “flow” with no choice or control over one’s destiny.

As believers, we choose each minute of each day whether we are going to embrace God or go our own way. We “go our own way” by trusting ourselves, seeking what the world offers, and seeing ourselves as the center of the universe. It is interesting that, even when we go that way, we are participating in God’s plan by exercising free will, but we must also understand this: When we walk away from God, *we are not operating in His will*. As a result, we will see the plan, in a sense, work against us...because we are working against the will of God. When we work against the *will*, the *plan* no longer favors us. We will see more on this in the next study.

In a practical sense, our choice must include the following “shorthand” tools for achieving spirituality and maturity: confession, prayer, study, and faith. (The “longhand” version of these assets can be seen in all our previous studies.) We will inevitably live “in the plan”, but by using the aforementioned tools, we can truly LIVE in the plan, which means that we will be “doing His will”.

So we have a dichotomy: God’s plan and God’s will. God’s plan accommodates both His will *and* ours. Our concern is twofold: the “fulfillment” of the plan, and the “satisfaction” of His will...in our lives...in time. God’s *plan* for us has mapped our movement toward the accomplishment of His *will*, and will be an instrument of fruit and fulfillment, to the degree that we actually choose Him, or “get closer” to Him. This is what it’s all about: Drawing nearer to Him, where we can find the motivation and strength to satisfy His will.

His original will was for us to choose to follow Him and fellowship with Him, but we did not do this, so He had to make a plan that involved His Son rescuing us from the condemnation we had earned. Once we have chosen to be rescued, His plan works best when we are committed to it in our daily lives. With commitment to His plan, translated as “doing His will”, the plan will provide for the following:

- We will have fellowship with Him.
- We will exhibit the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, etc.

*Bible Basics on Living in God's Plan: Pathway to Purpose*

- We will confess and pray and study and trust.
- We will be blessed with His special provision for us, especially spiritual strength and guidance, but also our daily needs.
- We will experience growth and maturity.
- We will earn rewards in heaven.
- We will honor God.

If we do not commit to God's plan, by learning and following His will, the following will happen:

- We will lose fellowship with God.
- Acts of the sinful nature will be apparent.
- We will not use the techniques God has provided for us.
- Provision will change to discipline, and spiritual strength and guidance will be lost.
- We will be depending on ourselves for daily needs, with resistance—rather than assistance—from God.
- We will be hampered in our growth, and will behave like immature believers, or even unbelievers.
- We will lose rewards in heaven.
- We will dishonor God.

Commitment is extremely important, and we will conduct an entire study on it as part of this series, but we will see first...in our next study...how the plan actually works “for us” or “against us”.



## **God's Plan Works "For Us" or "Against Us"**

This will be a brief study to flesh out the way God's plan seems to be working for us or against us. There are two basic tracks in God's plan, placing all of humanity on one or the other. One track leads to eternal life and a relationship with God; the other leads to eternal condemnation and separation from God. The difference is this: Those who have *believed* the gospel and accepted Christ have eternal life, whereas those who have *not believed* have eternal death. These two separate tracks proceed in opposite directions. By exercising faith in Christ, the track to heaven is chosen; by rejecting Christ, the track to hell becomes the "default" choice.

The track to eternal life splits into two tracks, as well, which means there are two "tracks" in God's plan for believers. One is a "good" track, and the other is a "bad" track. When we are on the good track, we will be in God's will and we will do things and experience events that are positive and productive. When we are on the bad track, God will not hear our prayers, will not energize us, and will not necessarily "work" things for our good. The promise for things working for good, seen in Rom. 8:28, is for those who "love God", which means those who are in fellowship and who are maturing in their walk with the Lord. These are the ones who will be drawing closer to God, will be led by the Spirit, and will see the grace of God assisting them in their lives. It is important to note that both the good and the bad tracks end up in the same place for believers (in heaven), but the good track makes the journey so much nicer than the bad one, and will make our homecoming so much sweeter.

We have studied over and over the principle of God's empowerment and enablement for the believer who is confessing, praying, studying, and trusting God. (If you have not studied all our books prior to this one, it is **IMPERATIVE** that you do so, preferably before you try to complete this one.) When we are fulfilling the commands of Scripture to walk in the Spirit and walk by faith, we can be sure we are on a good track, where God's blessings, especially spiritual ones, will overflow.

In Lev. 26:3-39, we see a passage that applies primarily to the Israelites, calling for their obedience to the laws that God has given them. We won't reprint the entire passage here, and trust that you will read and follow it as we analyze what is taught here. The admonishments seen in this passage were given under the Law, but there is an application that can be made here to the walk of believers in the Church Age. This passage distinguishes those "in the will of God" (good track) from those who are "out of the will of God" (bad track). When we are "in", the plan is working for us, but when we are "out", the plan is designed to put the squeeze on us to get us back "in". The objective is positive...to get us back in...but the process can be harsh and unpleasant, as God works His plan to get our attention and coax (not coerce) us back into his will. God never forces us to choose Him, but He uses divine strategies to help us recognize right choices.

Please have your Bible open to Leviticus 26. Verse 3 introduces the good-track list by telling what happens “if you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands...” Verses 4-13 show the outcomes on the “good track”.

### **What Happens on the Good Track**

1. v. 4-5—God will send rain and give good crops. Growing seasons will be long and fruitful. Food will be plentiful. This suggests financial prosperity and economic security. God will meet all their physical needs.
2. v. 6-8—God will give security, both in their nation and in their homes. Enemies, wild animals or dangerous creatures, and any other force that might cause them to fear harm will be overpowered or removed.
3. v. 9-10—Families will grow and prosper. They will enjoy the bounty of physical and spiritual blessings from God. He will walk among them in a favorable way, and be their protective and loving God.
4. v. 13—They will live in freedom. They will not be overpowered or enslaved by anyone, so they can live their lives with a sense of confidence and safety.

Verses 14-15 set up the “bad track”, saying, “But if you will not listen to me and carry out all these commands, and if you reject my decrees and abhor my laws...,” trouble is on the way. Verses 16-30 give the outcomes on the “bad track”.

### **What Happens on the Bad Track**

1. Verse 16—God will bring on them sudden catastrophe: terrible diseases, loss of sight, and physical death.
2. Verse 17—The people will be defeated by their enemies, because God will no longer be protecting them. They will be controlled and tormented by people that hate them. Their environment and homes will be so unsafe that they will cower in constant fear, until they become paranoid. They will run, even when no one is chasing them.
3. Verses 19-20—Crops will fail, and their finances will deplete. There will not be enough food.
4. Verse 22—Wild animals will steal the children, depleting the population, and will ravage the livestock, further complicating the food shortage.
5. Verse 25—Hostile governments and gangs will come against them, and plagues will sweep through their cities.
6. Verses 26-27—Hunger will drive them to cannibalism.
7. Verses 28-30—The people will suffer psychological and spiritual depression and will find no relief from God.

8. Verses 31-39—The cities and lands will become desolate and useless, and the people will be scattered. All of the above will continue to get worse and worse.

In four places in these verses describing the bad track, God tells them that, each time they do not respond and return to the good track, their punishments will be intensified seven times over. By the time they have come to the end of the bad track, their punishments will have increased by a huge factor. You've heard how bad things can get when they become "twice" as bad? How about when they reach a level over 16,000 times as bad? Looks like "someone" would get the message.

God's plan always provides a solution, however, and you can be sure He has given a quick-fix, fast-track, sure-fire way for us to get back into a good part of the plan. Verses 40-42 give a solution we are familiar with...this is the first and most important piece of equipment we have in our spiritual arsenal to keep us on the right track:

But if they will confess their sins and the sins of their fathers—their treachery against me and their hostility toward me, which made me hostile toward them so that I sent them into the land of their enemies—then when their uncircumcised hearts are humbled and they pray for their sin, I will remember my covenant with Jacob and my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land.

The first solution for believers on the bad track is seen in v. 40 above, and in 1 Jn. 1:9, "If we [believers] confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." God's plan is formed in love and grace, and He has enabled us to be free, even to be horrible, and still He provides a way for us to return to fellowship with Him and get back on the good track. What a plan!

## Election

**Election and Choice.** The term “election” is used primarily by those who believe that God chooses the people He wants to save. It will not be the purpose of this examination to personally discredit anyone who believes this, or to launch a scholarly attack on the position known as “Calvinism”. Reasonable and brilliant students of the Word, both now and historically, have adopted the position that God unilaterally picks “believers” based on His own sovereignty. We are not equipped to take on these superior scholars, as their position is well-described and defended in numerous articles, sermons, dissertations, and books extolling predestination. But in our own pedestrian and starry-eyed way, we want to stick with what *we* see in the Bible, and use election to help us understand God’s plan. If you espouse Calvinism, our intent here will be to persuade you away from your position on God’s election...not to insult you or offend you.

The positions of those espousing predestination agree with us that God has absolute control. Where they depart from us is in their understanding and application of God’s foreknowledge, and our ability to choose. We want to closely examine issues of foreknowledge, election, choosing, calling, and predestination as these apply to the plan of God. These concepts are crucial to our understanding of God’s plan for mankind, and we *must* take whatever time we need to clarify their place in the plan. Our purpose will be to build on the knowledge we have already gained from previous studies, and use the topic of election as a beacon to further elucidate the tenets of God’s plan. The doctrine of “election”, as *we* see it in Scripture, perfectly illustrates, and even demonstrates, God’s plan, exactly as we have presented it in these studies.

**God Wants Everyone to be Saved.** 2 Pet. 3:9b says, “He is patient with you, not wanting any to perish.” God wants all of mankind to be saved. Jesus said something similar, referring to a lamb that had been lost. The main application of the “missing sheep” in this verse is toward believers who have sinned and wandered away from fellowship, but another view is that God does not want anyone to be “lost” eternally. The truth we see in this passage is that God wants people “right”, whether we are talking about God’s wish for everyone to be saved, or His will to see everyone walking in the Spirit. He wants the lost to believe...and the wayward believer to confess. What He *wants*, however, is subjected to what *we choose*, as we have seen before, and will see again.

**Revisiting God’s Plan and Our Choice.** We cannot address all the arguments taking the position that God arbitrarily “chooses” those He will save. Various proponents of these views claim that God chooses some to go to heaven and others to go to hell, and that God does not love everyone, and that God simply does not want certain people to be saved, and that faith somehow reflects effort and merit, and that our having “choice” diminishes God’s sovereignty, and that Christ died for some and not for others. Those who embrace these notions explain “foreknowledge” as virtually “fore-choosing”, a definition that does not

comport with what we have seen, either in Scripture, or in our arm-chair linguistic analysis. The view that fore-choosing is the same thing as fore-knowing turns God and salvation and grace and choice upside-down and has the effect of making God a puppet-master. These arguments are becoming more widespread...it is my hope that you will weigh them carefully based on what you see in the Word of God, and evaluate them in light of God's true nature, as you understand Him.

It is important to comprehend that the most basic premise in *our* conception of God's plan is that God *made a choice to give us choice*. If God had not, in His wisdom, chosen to allow us to believe or not believe, then God's plan would be a mechanistic process by which His design would run through a sequence directed solely by Him. But we do not believe this is how He works. We believe He *does* control everything...except our choice. As humans, we think, evaluate, and choose independently of God's manipulation. If He gave us our thoughts and chose our inclinations, we would be robots, and that is not how He made us. Our basic position is this: We choose...and God plans. And part of the plan is to give us choice.

**Grace in Election.** Those who believe God elects us solely on the basis of His will, claim that God's grace is to be lauded, because without it, *no one* would be saved. With God as the "chooser", at least *some* people are saved. He *could* condemn the entire human race, because of Adam's sin. But get this: Grace that makes baseless choices for some humans to "burn" and others to "turn" does not seem like grace at all, but more like frivolous insouciance. This is not the great and holy God we know and love...Who loves us and all of mankind. The God we understand is a God Who wants ALL to come to Him. In fact, He wants this so intently that He brought His Son into the world and had Him die an extreme death as our sacrifice, to allow us to qualify for a relationship with Him. So much was done on our behalf! Yet it all seems unnecessary, if God makes one-sided selections of those He will save...without conditions.

Most Calvinists believe that God loves only *certain* ones. But we have seen from the Bible that God loves *everyone*. John 3:16 tells us that God "so loved the world..." Furthermore, His grace extends to the entire human race. Titus 2:11 confirms this, saying, "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men." God's saving grace is available universally to all who want it. In Rom. 11:2a, where Paul is speaking of the Jews, but giving a message that can apply to us as well, we see this: "God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew." The basis for God's grace choosing us is His foreknowledge of our choice. But we cannot understand God's choosing us, unless we can see clearly that HIS choice is based on OUR choice.

Choice is also seen clearly in the following quote from Rom. 10:9-13. Notice the terms, "anyone" and "everyone", indicating that salvation is OPEN to all who want it. Here is the passage:

That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you

believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

God loves the entire world and *anyone* can come to Him. That is real grace. That is the God we know.

**God Does Choose Us.** We see a preponderance of scriptures that clearly state that God chooses us. And we have seen that this choice is based on God's "preview" of our coming to His Son in faith, which earmarks us to be "chosen". 2 Thess. 2:13 says this:

But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers, loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through the gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

From this verse, we see again that God chose us in *eternity past* to be saved. He saw at that time our thirst for Him (positive volition) and made a schedule for the gospel to get to us, so that we could be saved. His plan is being played out. We see this again in a phrase in Rev. 17:8, which says, "The names of the inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished..." This has to do with future events during the Tribulation, but the point of interest to us in this passage is the reference to "names not written in the book of life from the creation of the world". The names of certain people (unbelievers) were *not* recorded before creation. We can be sure that the names of believers *were* recorded. Can you imagine? The Creator wrote your name in eternity past. This is staggering. But the names were written based on foreknowledge, not as an autocratic selection.

Eph. 1:11-13 also provides a description of God's planning and choosing process. This passage gives us the following:

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit....

We are chosen and predestined based on what? The verse above suggests the answer to this question: "According to the plan...." This plan belongs to God, who is executing it in line with the "purpose" of His "will". Our being chosen and predestined is predicated on God's plan, which is this: All who seek God will find Him; finding Him is when we "believe". Go back to the verse above...Here is what it says, in light of what we already know from

Scripture: **Anyone who has positive volition will receive the gospel, and believe, and be “marked in him”, and be sealed by the Holy Spirit forever.** And don't miss this...why is He doing this? Here it is: "...for the praise of his glory." If He chooses us without regard for our volition for Him, He would just be powerful. But if He lets us choose Him, he will be glorified. See the difference?

**And We Do Choose.** We will see in the following three references a clear indication that we have the ability to make *choices* regarding God and spiritual matters. Look for evidence in these verses that we *do* have a choice. We will take these up one at a time, as follows:

1. In Josh. 24:15, we see the following:

But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

See “choice” at work? “Choose for yourselves...whom you will serve.”

2. In this same chapter (ch. 24), verses 21-22 say this: “But the people said to Joshua, ‘No! We will serve the Lord.’ Then Joshua said, ‘you are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the Lord.’” These Israelites were declaring a choice to serve the Lord, and they were being held responsible to cling to that choice. But *they* were the ones choosing.
3. In Luke 10:41-42, we see Jesus with Martha. She is complaining about Mary, who is doing nothing but sitting at Jesus' feet and listening, hanging on to every word. Martha thinks Mary should get up and help with the chores. Here is Jesus' reply to Martha:

“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

Mary *chose* to sit at Jesus' feet to hear Scripture taught. She exercised her free will to do this.

God has given us choice. We are in the plan, but we can choose. Since we have chosen the blood of Christ to save us, we can now choose to focus on the wonderful life made available through getting closer to God. We will have much more to say about this later.

**The True Story of Foreknowledge.** We will look now at several verses that include the term “foreknowledge” or “foreknew”...or some equivalent of these. As we suggested earlier, those who embrace unilateral predestination see foreknowledge as a process that holds hands with choosing or selecting, not as a sequence, but as *one act*. They believe that, when God says He “foreknew” us, that is the same as fore-choosing us. They make

foreknowing and choosing synonymous, collapsing these actions into a single event, thus getting around God's foreknowledge as a *basis* for choosing. We want to see if this bears out by looking at a number of scriptures that use the term or idea of foreknowledge, especially as it is linked with choice.

Here are some verses that include the process or concept of foreknowledge and/or choice (all italics mine):

- Acts 2:23 says, "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and *foreknowledge*; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross." Jesus was "handed over" in accordance with God's "ordained counsel [plan] and foreknowledge" (*Interlinear Translation—Endnote 2*). God's plan includes His foreknowledge.
- 1 Pet. 1:1*a* and 2*a* says, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect...who have been chosen according to the *foreknowledge* of God the Father..." The choice is based on foreknowledge. As a result, they are the "elect".
- Rom. 11:2*a* says, "God did not reject his people, whom he *foreknew*..." We saw this verse earlier. God chose the Israelites, nationally and one-by-one, on the basis of His foreknowing their volition toward Him.
- Rom. 8:29*a* says, "For those God *foreknew* he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son..." Because God knew before creation our inner attitude toward Him (our "volition"), He was able to map our destiny to become believers and acquire the righteousness of His Son forever.
- Acts 1:24 says, "Then they prayed, 'Lord, you *know* everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen.'" Judas' replacement in the apostolic ministry was being considered. The disciples recognized God's insight into the respective volitions of the two finalists for this role ("...you know everyone's heart"), and knew that He had **already** made the choice. He *chose on the basis of knowing*. After they prayed, they cast lots (the equivalent of flipping a coin) and the choice was known.

Most of the verses above use some form of the Greek word that means "foreknowledge". None of them imply "choosing". The word is "*prognosis*". The English word "prognosis", a derivative of this word, is familiar to us in modern times as "a doctor's outlook for the projected path of an ailment". His forecast of the future of a disease is based on his knowledge of how the disease works. His foresight and prognosis are good, but not perfect, while God's foresight is absolute...and His "prognosis" is perfect, because His knowledge is perfect. "Pro" means "before"; "gnosis" means "knowledge". This makes up the term "before-knowledge", or foreknowledge.



*Bible Basics on Living in God's Plan: Pathway to Purpose*

We will see next a couple of additional verses that have this word in noun or verb form. Please notice that “foreknowledge” means just that: “foreknowledge”. Here are two samples (italics mine):

1. Acts 26:5 says, “They have *known* me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing....” Paul is saying that the Jews can testify to his history, because they “before-knew” him. They already know him well; they have “foreknowledge” of him. Remember that God’s foreknowledge is also based on history, but His history is future, as well as past.
2. 2 Pet. 3:17a says, “Therefore, dear friends, since you *already know* this, be on your guard....” Peter’s readers already knew that false teachers were attempting to distort Scripture, so they were being told to be vigilant in order to avoid doctrinal traps. These believers had “foreknowledge” about these deceivers.

We should distinguish verses using “*prognosis*” from those using “*eklegomai*”. The Greek word “*eklegomai*” means “to choose”. This Greek word corresponds with the Hebrew word, “*bachar*”, which also means “to choose”. Here are some verses that use one or the other of these two terms, to illustrate the concept of “choosing”, so we can see the difference between this and “foreknowing” (italics mine):

- Deut. 30:19b says, “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now *choose* life, so that you and your children may live.”
- Josh. 24:15a says, “But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then *choose* for your selves this day whom you will serve....”
- Mark 13:20 says, “If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect, whom he has *chosen*, he has shortened them.”
- Luke 10:42 says, “...but only one thing is needed. Mary has *chosen* what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”
- Eph. 1:4a says, “For he *chose* us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.”

Foreknowledge and choosing are NOT the same thing. One is a pre-existing condition *within* God; the other is an action *of* God. Foreknowing is *passive*; choosing is *active*. Having established this, we must clearly delineate the following sequence of “givens” in God’s plan for a believer:

- God has foreknowledge.
- We have choice.

- God foresees our positive volition and our decision to choose Him.
- God chooses those He foresees.
- We are saved.

Please note: The gospel is “good news”. If God chooses us, with the result that we have no choice...then there is **no** good news to tell. “Yeah, neighbor, I wish I had some good news for you, but you may just not be one of the lucky ones. Sorry. I guess you may spend eternity in hell. I know...snap!”

**Predestination in Romans 8 and 9.** We are going to “peruse”, not “exegete”, these passages, so the following cannot be seen as a scholarly treatise...it’s just what *we* see from these passages, in light of what we have come to understand about God’s plan.

Rom. 8:28-30 gives God’s complete plan of election, as we see in the following, taken from the NET Bible:

And we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose, because those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; and those he called, he also justified, and those he justified, he also glorified.

Verse 28 starts out with where we are *in time* as believers (“those who have been called”). Everything in our lives is working together “for good” as long as we “love God”, which we know from previous studies means we are in fellowship (all sins are confessed), walking in the Spirit (by faith), and maturing (by studying the Word). When these things are true of us, we will love God and see things working for our good.

Verse 29 looks back on verse 28, and applies the condition, “those He foreknew” to the “called” of verse 28. Foreknowledge is step one in the plan of salvation. If He did not know our faith beforehand, He would not have called us. But since He *did* know it, He called us. Once again, notice the difference between His “foreknowing” and His “calling” (or choosing). Then, because He foreknew our belief, and called us, He “predestined” us to be “conformed to the image of His Son”. He *predestined* us to be changed from an existential condition of unrighteousness to one of righteousness—covering us with the “image” of Jesus Christ—so that our eternal state is shrouded by His perfection. This refers, of course, to our being saved, when we are imputed with the righteousness of Christ.

Please hang on to the sequence...it is very important. He *foreknew* our faith in “eternity”, when He *scheduled* us for salvation, an event that would take place *in time*. This is the process whereby He “predestined” us to be saved, which is His plan at work.

Verse 30 outlines the sequence of God’s plan from start to finish: He predestines us in eternity past, calls us, justifies us, and will eventually glorify us. None of these terms should

need explanation. These are the steps in the plan of salvation being structured, as follows: 1) setting our eternal destiny based on His foreknowledge, 2) calling us through the gospel, 3) giving us the righteousness of Christ when we believe in Him, and 4) providing us with a glorified body that will live forever with Him. And in between steps 3 and 4 is the Christian life, which we are in, and which forms the reason for our pushing forward to understand God's plan and will for us now...in time.

A short discussion is being interjected here to distinguish "called" as seen in v. 28, and "called" as seen in v. 30. The usage of these terms confirms the sequence of God's plan as we have delineated it in this study. In v. 28, "called" is *kletos* in the Greek. This means "invited", which is the call of the gospel. In v. 30, "called" is *kaleo* in the Greek, which means, "to call aloud"...this is the prompting of the Holy Spirit at our appointed time of accepting Christ. The root word for *kaleo* is *kello*, which means to command, giving the term *kaleo* additional firmness.

The difference between the first usage of "called", and the second, is significant. One is an invitation; the other is a directive. "Called" in v. 28 shows God in eternity past writing our names on invitations to be delivered to us in time. "Called" in v. 30 shows His tapping each of us on the shoulder and handing us our invitations...that are now our marching orders. We are to be saved immediately, and must report to heaven at a time to be announced. God plans our salvation, and then makes it happen. But before He planned it, He already knew we would be accepting, because He saw beforehand our interest in being with Him. The choice was still ours.

Rom. 9 is the Calvinist mantra for election. But when this chapter is understood with a correct view of God's foreknowledge, as it fits in with His plan, the claim of Calvinists that Rom. 9 proves that God "chooses" is invalidated. IF foreknowledge is the same as fore-choosing, then they have a case, but this runs counter to the rest of what the Bible says about God, grace, faith, free will, and salvation. Foreknowledge *leads to* fore-choosing...but these are not identical.

We will proceed verse-wise through this chapter, and pull out the ideas that contribute to our understanding of God's plan. This chapter, rather than challenging our notions about the plan, will help us frame it and understand it. Please follow along in your Bible, so we can conserve the space on these pages for our comments.

**Read Rom. 9:1.** Paul is emphatic about the truth of His words, and shows that his message is from God.

**Read Rom. 9:2.** Paul is crushed by sadness over the plight of his Jewish "brothers" (a national, and not a spiritual, identity).

**Read Rom. 9:3.** He wishes that he could take the curse of being separated from Christ in place of his Jewish brothers.

**Read Rom. 9:4.** The Jews were the original chosen race. [Remember: They had been chosen on the basis of God's foreknowledge of their faith.] The Jews have a special history with God, and are the human ancestors of Jesus Christ.

**Read Rom. 9:6-9.** Jews in the Old Testament were not just "chosen" because of birthright. They were "chosen" because they believed God's Word and His promise of the coming Messiah. God's Word was His covenant with Israel. God's promise was to a certain people—"the children of the promise"—who are not all merely descendants of Israel and Abraham. Some are more than that: the Jews who received the "circumcision of the heart", or that believed in the anticipated Messiah, are "true" children of Abraham. The statement of the promise in verse 9 is that "Sarah will have a son." God promised that He would return at a time He chose to perform the event He promised. The human line that followed is one of blood, though the spiritual line is one of faith. The larger promise is that Christ would come, and the children of the promise are Old Testament "believers".

**Read Rom. 9:10-13.** God is beginning to group humanity according to His anticipation of their faith (cf. Acts 17:24-31). God saw Jacob's faith beforehand, and embraced that anticipated condition to plan Jacob's placement, instead of Esau's, as the human *forefather* (although he was also the spiritual *follower*) of Christ. God's choosing, seen in "God's purpose and election", is God ordering events around the choices He knew were going to be made. And when God's plan is set, it will STAND.

Because God read the relative faith status of the twins beforehand, He saw Jacob as fitting into the plan as the key player between the two, so—before he is even born—he is "called".

**Read Rom. 9:14.** "What shall we say, then? Is God unjust" to pick Jacob, and not Esau? God is not unjust! His righteous judgment and wisdom are absolutely extolled because He saw beforehand the volition of each of these brothers. He knew...and He chose on that basis.

**Read Rom. 9:15.** God is just! He said to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." God can do what He wants. But He made us like Him, and He tells us "whosoever will", may come. It is open for us to choose, because He gives us that choice. We choose, as He knew we would, and—based on our choice—He gives us forgiveness (mercy) and grace (compassion), thus choosing us to be with Him forever. He planned it; now He does it. He adopts us into His family forever...because we believe in His Son and His work.

**Read Rom. 9:16.** "It does not depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy." Salvation (deliverance from the consequences of sin) does not depend on our wanting it (positive volition is not the condition of salvation, only a signal for God to get the gospel to us), nor can we be saved by our works. We can only be delivered on the basis of God's mercy. This is the TRUE basis of salvation: *God's forgiveness through His grace, which we access by faith*. Nothing about us qualifies us for God's grace, but He accepts our "choosing" Him, and He gives us at that time all we need to be acceptable to Him.

**Read Rom. 9:17.** “For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: ‘I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’” God’s plan placed Pharaoh in a position of power. He knew in eternity past that Pharaoh would reject Him, and He placed him in a place to be used. His heart was already known to be hardened toward God, and now God permitted that condition to be used with the Israelites. Why? God was setting up a stage-show to demonstrate His power and get the Word out that God is GREAT! And did He ever!

**Read Rom. 9:18.** “Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and hardens whom he wants to harden.” The plan calls for God to engineer events, based on our choices. RECORD THIS: When He foresees positive volition leading to *belief*, He plans *mercy*; when He foresees negative volition leading to sustained *disbelief*, He plans *hardening*. This applies to individuals and nations.

**Read Rom. 9:19-21.** Here, Paul addresses the plan. When God chooses someone, as He does because He foreknows one’s faith, it might be understandable that someone would ask, “Why does God still blame us? Who can resist His will?” This question is asked because God’s plan is not understood. On the basis of our choosing Him, He chooses us. We cannot claim that His choosing is unfair, because it is based on *our* choices. But from a human perspective, it may seem that God is being arbitrary. We know this is not true, and that God only “blames” those who reject Him, in which case the consequences of His plan cannot be resisted.

When God chooses us, He “forms” us, remaking us, or regenerating us. And He is “right” in doing so, because His Son is our sacrificial substitute, and the Father is satisfied with the righteousness we receive from Him. And when He chooses us, we are like a lump of clay that the potter makes into something grand, “for noble purposes”, instead of leaving us to be discarded, or destined for a useless and pointless existence. He *determines our salvation, and then performs it by His grace through our faith*. No objection will stand. And through it all, He will be glorified.

**Read Rom. 9:22-29.** In this passage we see clear reference again to God’s plan. God used Pharaoh to show His power so we could see the riches of His glory in motion. We see the way Pharaoh resisted the release of the Jews, and how God dealt with him, and as we study this even now, we praise God and thank Him for His power to govern man and run the universe...and to save us. *We* are the “objects of his mercy whom he prepared in advance for glory” (v. 24). He planned our salvation, both Jews and Gentiles. He planned to *choose* the ones He called “my people”. They had not been His people, but He *made* them His people. “They will be called ‘sons of the living God’” (v. 26). God chooses ahead of time because He sees faith well in advance.

Unfortunately, many Jews will not believe and will not be saved during the Church Age. From among the Jews, only a “remnant” will be saved. That remnant is sufficient to prevent

the plan from bringing national extinction to the Jews, as they look forward to a day when they will become again a “nation of God”.

**Read Rom. 9:30-32.** Faith, God’s plan, and salvation are the same for Jews and Gentiles. But each of these groups was failing for different reasons. The Gentiles had not “pursued” righteousness, and the Jews had not “attained” it under the Law. The Gentiles had not even paid attention to God’s righteousness, while the Jews were trying to manufacture their own, but God looks only for faith. God knew the faith of individual members of these groups, which allowed one group (the Jews) to be collectively more prominent in the Old Testament, while the other one (all nations) was more evident in the New Testament. But God’s plan was present and powerful throughout these times, and for all time...and for all eternity. God always responds to faith.

**Read Rom. 9:33.** Christ was the rock the Jews tripped over because the Jews chose not to believe in Him. They did not “trust in Him”, as this verse says.

So we see God’s plan at work in this chapter. We see His foreknowledge, His choosing, His saving grace, and His respect for the free will He has given to us. Taken out of the context of “God’s plan”, as we have seen it in Scripture, it is easy to see how some could construe predestination as the sovereign act of an all-powerful God. But when we see Romans 9 within the sphere of God’s plan, we see that it confirms, rather than undermines, the consistent truth that God has given us free will, and that He chooses us only because He knows that we have chosen Him. Period.

**Recapitulation on Election.** Our salvation was foreknown. God planned that the condition of regeneration would be faith, or believing in His Son. God could see before creation which humans had faith, and which did not. Those God saw beforehand as “having that faith” were chosen and elected, not because of *God’s* election, but because they believed. The condition of salvation is not “election”, but faith. Whenever belief occurs, election takes place. God knows which ones will believe, just as Jesus “foreknew” Judas was *not* a believer. John 13:18-19 tells us about Jesus’ anticipation of Judas’ betrayal:

I am not referring to all of you; I know those I have chosen. But this is to fulfill the scripture: He who shares my bread has lifted up his heel against me. I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am He.

Jesus saw Judas’ heart beforehand, and saw no faith. Faith is the basis for salvation, meaning *our* faith. If God *gives* us this faith, and generates the believing *for* us, then *His faith* is the basis for our salvation, and the faith cannot be ours. It is His. But God cannot “believe Himself” on our behalf at salvation. If He could—and would—the condition of *our* believing would never have been set up. If God’s election is the basis for our being saved, then we do not have to believe...He will believe *for* us, and our volition is extraneous and superfluous. If He is going to *choose* us, why are we called upon to *believe*? There would be *no* condition for salvation if He chose us, except *His choice*. Any other component, such as believing, adds nothing to the outcome. It is absolute, undiluted, and unequivocal: If God picks, we don’t;

*Bible Basics on Living in God's Plan: Pathway to Purpose*

and if we don't pick, why are we told to *believe*? Why is the condition set for us to reflect a position on the truth of Christ, if we have no choice about that position? It can only be one way: God knows who will be saved, and plans it.

Remember this: In God's foreknowing, there is no "action". Our salvation actually begins with God's passive awareness of our belief. Our believing is an event He sees outside Himself. As we said, His "knowing" is not an action. This knowledge then moves God to act...to predestinate, call, and justify. Foreknowledge is passive; saving us is active. But He does not act unless He knows we want Him. Because he "knows", He "chooses".

Faith...believing...is *not* something we "do". It is our *response of acceptance* to God, Who offers life through His Son. If faith were "doing" something, then we would be working for salvation. We would be saved because of something we do. If faith is, as Calvinists say, a "work", thus disqualifying it as the basis for salvation, then why does Paul go to such great lengths to establish that faith and works are mutually exclusive? Faith is NOT works. They are opposites in Scripture. Therefore, faith cannot be seen as having intrinsic merit. It is "non-meritorious", falling nowhere within the realm of works.

God sees our choices from eternity past (how can He not know them?), assesses them, and sets each individual human to either be saved or condemned as an ultimate outcome of choice. He "chooses" believers, and "hardens" unbelievers, based on His knowledge of their choices. But the responsibility for choosing always rests with each man.

## **Our Plans and God's Plan**

**Planning in the World.** Pragmatic constraints require us to function in the world. We have a responsibility to plan in a way that is logical, anticipating cause and effect and predicting outcomes. We set goals, assess our resources, and consider possibilities. We might draw up a plan, or write it out, or plot it on a computer, and so on. But in fact, most plans are formed within our own imaginations. This is what we do.

When we talk about planning in the world, we begin where we are...in our present locations and circumstances. From that point, we branch out into the world as we see it, and begin to position ourselves within it in the form of a plan. This is routine. As believers, however, we have a special problem. Our plan has to fit in with a larger plan...one created by God. Planning in the world is straightforward and should always be the best we can do; we should make every effort to make *good* plans. But planning within God's plan is another matter altogether, and this is our greatest concern.

We imagine that there are plenty of how-to books to teach us about the practical steps one should take to plan strategically and effectively. It's a worthwhile pursuit to acquire the best planning skills and practices out there to help us become better planners. But that is not our objective in this study. We are studying ways to live in God's plan, so our focus is not on becoming effective "planners", but on how we can make our plans, whatever they are, mesh smoothly with God's plan. Remember, the outcomes belong to Him.

Our challenge is not a scientific one, or a clinical one, or an academic one...it is a *spiritual* one. If our spiritual state is strong, we will make plans that God can work with, however the world might see them...and our plans will work for us. That is our beginning premise in regard to planning.

One of the areas where the Bible has given "practical" direction on planning is in seeking good advice, as we see next.

**Get Good Advice.** The most practical tip for planning is this: get good tips. You are going to plan, whether you intend to or not (even not planning is a plan), and since the outcome of your plans affect you directly, you want to plan the best you can. So plan correctly by seeking as much *good* advice as you can. This is a process in which "quality" (better tips) outweighs "quantity" (more tips). For advice to be good, the advisor must be good. Just because you poll one hundred people and ninety-nine of them agree with your plan does not mean the plan is good...perhaps the only one of your advisors with good sense is the one who opposes your plan. You must consider the source. Get advice, but get the best advice you can...from those who know what they are talking about *on the subject or area of expertise* you need advice on.



*Bible Basics on Living in God's Plan: Pathway to Purpose*

There are many scriptures confirming that it is a good idea to get all the (best) advice we can. Here are a few of them:

- Prov. 1:5—Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance.
- Prov. Lk. 14:31—Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and take counsel whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? (The term “take counsel”, from the *Interlinear Translation*, replaces “consider” in the NIV. Endnote 3.)
- Prov. 15:22—Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.
- Prov. 19:20—Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise.

The feasibility of your plan should be screened by those you trust to advise you on the thing you intend to do. The information and expert opinions you acquire can then be evaluated as you shape and re-shape your plan. But get this: The best advice you can get will come from the Master Planner, Who not only knows every outcome of every plan, but *controls* them. He gives us freedom to choose our path, but He is waiting with consequences for our choices. We have talked a lot about free will and our freedom to make decisions independently, but the thing we must remember is that God's plan responds to our choices with an array of outcomes that will tell us whether we have planned properly or not. This is God's training for us, which advises us through the events He directs around us.

**God Must Be in Your Plans.** When we talk about God's plan in our day-to-day lives, we are really talking about a process that is operating all the time...everywhere...as God responds to human choices, while engineering all the events in the world. As we look at His plan for humanity, we see that it deals primarily with our failures, and that includes faulty planning.

It is *good* for us to make plans. Our practical lives should be products of industriousness and ardent efforts to do things right, and to always make things better in our human environment. It would be foolish to advise against this. **But**, as we plan, we want to factor God into the equation, and seek His will and advice before we take action. Remember the verse from James (4:15) that we have quoted several times: “Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.’” This is a recognition of God's superiority, and a submission to His will, which should be at the heart of our planning process. In this, as in all things, we see this: We are inadequate, and God alone is competent.

Lam. 3:37 says, “Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it?” What we must understand at the outset is this: If our plans do not fit in with God's plan, they will not

happen! For our plans to be effective and successful they must comport with God's plan and God's will. So the first thing we must do *before* we begin planning is to ask for God's guidance in the planning process, invoking His wisdom as we weigh alternatives. Prov. 16:9 says, "In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps." We are expected to plan, but the plan must be surrendered to God, so He can absorb it into His plan and keep us on the "good track".

When we talked about God's control of everything, we traced His involvement in a world where *we choose*...and *He plans*. This is true in *our planning*, as well. He lets us plan, but He has a plan for our plans. So we must plan carefully and prayerfully, even at the most mundane level. Remember that God controls outcomes, meaning that He provides consequences for our decisions and plans. The more preparation we do in making our plan match His Word and His will, the more our plan will eventuate into good parts of His plan.

Crucial reminder: Sometimes when our plans fail, it is due to our spiritual state at the time we attempt the plan, more than it is the "rational" quality of the plan. God directs the outcome of a plan. Human perspective is secondary to divine connection, when it comes to the success of a plan.

By maintaining our spiritual walk and staying current in our Bible studies, and by building our faith and sustaining our prayer life, our thinking and planning will be influenced by God's plan, and our plans will tend to mirror His. Eccl. 5:7 says, "Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God." Because of our sinful natures, and the pull of the world and the temptation of the devil, our thoughts tend to pull us into unproductive, or even downright "destructive", patterns. If God does not loom over everything we plan, or is not a part of everything we do, what we plan and do will amount to nothing.

Once a plan is completed, we can ask God if our plan is good before we implement it. Judges 18:5 gives an example of a model prayer request, one asking for God to give feedback on some plans. This passage says, "Then they said to him, 'Please inquire of God to learn whether our journey will be successful.'" It is always appropriate to approach God *in faith* to get His guidance. His Word is available to us, and that is where we go for guidance and direction. When we ask God to teach us and give us wisdom and renew our minds through His Word...if we ask in faith...*he does it!* And that is the most direct and reliable way for us to confirm the worth and efficacy of our plans. We should get God's advice and help on our plans at each stage: before we plan, while we build the plan, as we execute the plan, and after the action of the plan is completed.

So the most practical component of planning is spiritual preparation. If we plan without reference to Scripture or without concern for God's will, we will not see our plans succeed. Planning time is a good time to maintain God-consciousness, which includes fear, faith, and surrender. Even if a plan comes together and we achieve some of our objectives, we will not have the peace and contentment that come from being in sync with God's will and plan. On

the other hand, when we are aligned with God's will, and walking by faith, and waiting on Him, we will see our plans succeed...and provision is guaranteed. Still, we must always say, "Your will be done," since His plan may bring about conditions we did not expect. Regardless, we will continue to trust that God is always in control.

**The Outcome of Planning.** We choose, we plan, we do...and God provides outcomes. That is where His plan, without forcing us, shapes us. And that is where our plans are refined over time, if we respond in faith. If we reject God, *as believers*, we will be under the disciplinary thumb of God, and the consequences of our decisions will be unpleasant. Is. 29:14-15 tells us what happens when we plan apart from God:

Therefore once more I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder; the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish. Woe to those who go to great depths to hide their plans from the Lord, who do their work in darkness and think, "Who sees us? Who will know?"

Our most brilliant plans will only get us into trouble, if they are not made with the glory of God as their objective.

The first thing we should do when we have a problem to solve or want to plan an event or outcome in our own lives...is to come before God in prayer. And, of course, if we have not prepared ourselves to pray the prayer of faith, the prayer won't help us. Prayer as an afterthought or a fire alarm is TOO LATE! For prayer to be effective, we must have done the work beforehand. We must do the following: offer frequent confession of our sins to God, follow confession with consistent prayer, pay constant attention to God's Word, and mix His teachings and promises with faith. *Then* we can pray the prayer of faith and surrender, and know that our plans are coinciding with God's plan, and we can move forward on a smooth trail. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight" (Prov. 3:5-6).

## Pleasing the Planner

**God is the Point of Everything.** God is the planner and point of all that exists. He not only made it all, and now sustains it all; He is the reason for it all. Remember the verse we cited earlier, “For from him and through him and to him are all things” (Rom. 11:36). Notice the term “to him”. It all flows *to* Him. God is the origin, the purpose, and the destiny for everything. He is infinitely important, with or without our acknowledgement. There is no question that He deserves our recognition and worship and reverence. Our first goal should be to please Him.

**Learning *What* Pleases God.** We want to take a quick look at what the scriptures say about pleasing God. Part of His plan is to enable us to do the things that satisfy His will and bring pleasure to Him. 2 Cor. 5:9 says, “So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.” Pleasing Him is part of His plan for us, and should be what we have planned, also. To do this, we must find out *what* pleases Him. Eph. 5:10 says outright that this is what we should do: “...and find out what pleases the Lord.” This is followed in the same chapter (ch. 5) with this: “Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.” We must know what He wants, because when God gets what He wants, He will be pleased.

The way to understand God’s will is given in Rom. 12:1-2, which says the following:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will.

When we know His will, and follow His steps, we will become acquainted with the ways we can please Him. Knowledge of His Word—as it relates to living—is the key. Col. 1:9-10 validates that this is the way we learn to please God, as we see in the following:

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God.

This makes it clear that we should increase our knowledge in order to please Him. Through knowledge of God’s will, and through “spiritual wisdom and understanding”, we can live a life...

- worthy of the Lord (Obviously, this cannot come from us. It must come from God Himself.),

- that pleases Him in every way,
- that enables us to bear fruit in every good work, and
- that continually increases our capacity for *more* knowledge.

**Learning How to Please God.** When we learn *what* pleases God, the next step is to know *how* to please Him. Col. 1:9-10 above shows that “studying” equips us to live lives that please God. Verse 11a in this chapter (ch. 1) follows up with where we get the “power” for such lives. Here is what this verse says, “...being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience...” The implication is that lives not “strengthened with all power” will NOT please God. Even a *right* thing done by fleshly effort is *wrong*. What we do is only *right*, and thus *pleasing to God*, when it comes from the energizing force of the Holy Spirit, which operates through us. This can only happen when we stay in His Word, and practice confession, prayer, and faith.

Rom. 14:17-18 confirms this concept, saying the following:

For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.

When we are filled with the Holy Spirit, or “walking in the Spirit”, and He controls us, He will produce His fruit in us. And anyone who serves Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit IS PLEASING TO GOD. The key is learning HOW to be *filled* with the Spirit, and how to *walk* in that Spirit. It is a matter of our being cleansed, and then walking by faith. This pleases God.

Being “sanctified”, which we know means to be “cleansed”, is a requirement for being filled with the Spirit. If we are not “pure”, then the sinful nature will be in charge...not the Holy Spirit. To be sanctified, we cannot just *try real hard* to avoid sin...we have to use God’s method for dealing with our sin. The way to restore fellowship and the filling of the Spirit is to confess our sins. In 1 Thess. 4:1-3a Paul told the Thessalonians that they should follow what he had taught them, so they could stay in fellowship and live to please God. He said this to them:

Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. It is God’s will that you should be sanctified....

They were honoring God’s will and living to please God, because they were being sanctified, or cleansed. Then they were walking by faith, in order to maintain God’s leadership and empowerment. (For a thorough discussion of the role of faith in spirituality, please see a previous study: *Walking by Faith*.)

**Scriptures on Pleasing God.** Finally, we want to provide some additional verses on “pleasing God”. These will flesh out what we have said in this and previous studies about this topic. We offer the following:

- Heb. 13:21—God equips us “with everything good for doing His will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to Him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”
- Eph. 5:8-10—“For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord.”
- 1 Thess. 2:4b—“We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts.”
- Gal. 1:10—“Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.”

We have to *learn* how to please God, which is to live in the *power* of the Holy Spirit. Our efforts in the flesh will not please God, but what God does *through us*...pleases Him. That's the plan.

## God is My Fortress

**God is Our Refuge.** Our God is rock-solid. He is caring and faithful and reliable. His love for us never changes, though what we may envision as “love” may not be the same as what He has in mind. We may think more in terms of body comfort, while God is more concerned with spiritual conditions. God created living souls, after all, and the bodies we occupy are more like motels than houses...they are temporary. His greatest provision is admittedly spiritual, but He does it all, and if we focus on Him and our relationship with Him, all the rest will be provided for, as well. His care is extensive enough to include all parts of our lives, and His plan includes being there for us.

God is always there. He not only cares...He is open for business. He will always welcome us into His care, even if we have been astray for a long time. He is our refuge. Ps. 18:2 says, “The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn [strength] of my salvation, my stronghold.” We are outmanned, outgunned, and outnumbered in the world, where Satan is loose and on the prowl...and our sinful natures are rubbing their hands together, ready to get us into the sin game. We need God's strength to withstand the evils that surround us. This includes not only what we know as “sin”, but the forces that lead us toward “rule-keeping” to please God...after all, legalism is a kind of self-dependence, which is a *sin*, perpetrated by the flesh.

It is good to know that we have a helper...that we are not alone. The term “refuge” gives us an image of a place of safety and provision, where we are secure in God's care. By entering God's fort, we are expressing trust in His power to protect us from evil forces that want to destroy us, and we can find the “rest” that comes from trusting Him. Ps. 62:5-8 gives us the following invitation and assurance:

Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken. My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge.

Ps. 94:21-22 confirms this, saying, “They band together against the righteous and condemn the innocent to death. But the Lord has become my fortress, and my God the rock in whom I take refuge.” We can trust in His reliable strength under all circumstances, and know that He is within us and around us, and that His plan has scheduled our care. Ps. 9:9-10 says, “The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. Those who know your name will trust in you, for you, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek you.” The “oppressed” are the humble, who confess their sins. Those who “know your name” are those who are mature...and are walking by faith. Those who “seek you” are those who are

discovering God's plan in His Word. Add these together and you have the Christian walk, where God walks with us and keeps us supplied.

**God is our Helper.** “My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth” (Ps. 121:2). He is our only “help”, because His plan for the universe—and our lives—is the only true reality. Thank God He has provided a door into His castle, where He watches over us. Ps. 121:5-8 paints a moving picture of this protective care:

The Lord watches over you—the Lord is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life; the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

The fortunate thing about God's plan for us is that it does include His grace and care. He will keep us from harm...forever. This is beautifully described in Ps. 73:22-26 (NET Bible), as follows:

I was ignorant and lacked insight; I was as senseless as an animal before you. But I am continually with you [now]; you hold my right hand. You guide me by your wise advice, and then you will lead me to a position of honor. Whom do I have in heaven but you? I desire no one but you on earth. My flesh and my heart may grow weak, but God always protects my heart and gives me stability.

Being “ignorant” and “animalistic” portrays an accurate picture of *failure to study* and *lack of confession*. But when we are *with God*, He will take hold of our hand and guide us. The NET Bible provides a footnote regarding the word “stability”, showing its literal Hebrew translation as “my portion”. When we get our “portion”—or provision—from God, stability results, because God's provision includes not only daily bread, but protection.

In Ps. 86, verse 2a, David prays, “Guard my life, for I am devoted to you.” This is similar to Rom. 8:28, which assures us that “all things work together for good for those who love God.” When we are choosing Him, He shields us from harm as part of His plan. This does not mean that we will not have suffering, but that—when we do—it will have a purpose, as we have seen repeatedly in previous studies. We can count on His help in every aspect of our lives, if we will stay close to Him. In Is. 41:13 God promises, “For I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, ‘Do not fear; I will help you.’” And Ps. 91:4-7 shows the extent of that help, as follows:

He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.

This is comforting, but it is conditional on our being in fellowship, staying in the Word, and trusting God. The conditional nature of God's help is stated in verses 9-13 (still in Ps. 91),



which says our safety—and even the ministering care of angels—depends on our spiritual state, as we see in the following:

If you make the Most High your dwelling—even the Lord, who is my refuge—then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. You will tread upon the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent.

God is our refuge, *if we stay there...in Him*. Otherwise, we will be like run-away children...and we will be out on our own. We will still be His children, but we will not have our feet under His table. When you walk away from God, you cannot expect anything to go right or work out, and your plans, though they may seem to be working out in some form, will not be successful.

**God Cares for Us.** God is watching us, wanting to provide, waiting to empower, and willing to help. But we have to be *with Him...near Him...to be within range to receive what He offers every day*. When we are in the place of provision...waiting on Him, feeding on His Word, believing in His promises, staying in fellowship, and living in surrender to Him, we will see His help. And we will know that we are safe, wanting nothing. If we are away from Him, however, we will have needs that will not be met; we will ask but not get answers; we will hunger, and not be fed. God helps those who stay at home...who walk together with Him.

When our condition is “right” with God, He will take care of us, and we will be content with what He provides. That contentment might even overshadow the provision. In a sense, our contentment—our peace—is *a main part* of the provision, perhaps the most important part. Just knowing we are pleasing God and that He is watching over us and taking care of us brings a special joy all its own. Heb. 13:5-6 follows this line of thought, saying this:

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I forsake you.” So we may say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”

Because He will never forsake us—when we are in fellowship and trusting Him—we can boldly declare that *He is our helper*, and we have no need to fear what man, or Satan, or the world can do to us. Ps. 56:3-4 is the original scriptural source for this concept, as we see in the following:

When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?

God is going to protect us, and no one is going to do anything to us that is not part of His plan. If something happens to us...that means it's “in the plan”, and the plan is perfect. Our job is to make sure we are working “with” the plan, so it will work “for” us, and *everyone* will be happy.

When we are “walking in the Spirit” and “walking by faith”, Ps. 27:13-14 tells us we can expectantly wait on God’s provision and protection. This passage says, “I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.” Twice this passage says to wait for the Lord. Wait in faith, knowing and believing that He will provide.

**Give it All to God.** Ps. 55:22 carries us beyond waiting for the Lord and accessing His provision, to a place where our entire Christian experience is connected to God’s care. This verse says, “Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall.” Those in fellowship have special provision...God will sustain them. So God’s provision is “provisional”. As we saw in the study on prayer, we cannot have the *provision* without satisfying the *proviso*. The “proviso” is fellowship and faith.

This concept is repeated by Peter, who gives us the process for God taking on our “cares”. 1 Pet. 5:6-7 says the following: “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety [cares] on him because he cares for you.” The first thing we do is *humble ourselves*. This involves the confession of our sins and our acknowledgement of God. This gets us into fellowship and gives us a proper view of our place in the pecking order of God’s creation. This sets the stage for the next step, which is “casting our care”. This does not just mean letting go of the little problems we have as they come up...though we should do that...this means EVERYTHING! We unload *everything* on God, IN FAITH, knowing that everything that happens is part of His plan, that He controls everything, and that everything is working together for our good. By surrendering everything to Him, we admit our inadequacy to be what we should, or to achieve what He wants, or to take care of ourselves, and we express *faith* in His power to make good things happen. This is casting our care...giving it all to God, not just our troubles, but our *entire selves*.

Phil. 4:6-7 fleshes out the idea of surrendering the outcomes of our lives to God, saying this:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

To lose our anxiety, and to have the peace of God, and to have our emotions and mental state stabilized, we MUST pray about every single thing. Otherwise, what will we see? Only this: anxiety, loss of peace, and emotional and mental instability. But remember this: in order for prayer to reverse these undesirable conditions, we must pray in the right way and under the right conditions. If you did not read the study, *Being Devoted to Prayer*, or need a refresher, STOP! Get a copy of that book and read or re-read it right now. It is foundational to our understanding of Phil. 4:6. For the “prayer and petition” to be effective, all conditions for praying in the Spirit and offering up the “prayer of faith” have to be met.

*Bible Basics on Living in God's Plan: Pathway to Purpose*

When the conditions for prayer are satisfied, and we pray “in everything”, casting our care on Him, we will see God's provision meeting our spiritual and psychological and physical needs. We can count on it.

## God Creates Conditions

**We Choose, but God Sets Conditions.** We make choices, because we have free will. This is not an option. We *will* make choices, since “not choosing” is a choice. But God creates conditions around our choices, and controls all external events and circumstances. This is His plan at work, wherein He controls everything, but gives us free choice. But then He has the last word, because He controls the outcomes of our choices. This means that our status and conditions come from God. Ex. 4:11 gives us an initial glimpse at how this works, saying, “The Lord said to him, ‘Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the Lord?’” God even controls the conditions of our bodies, and gives us outcomes for decisions by bringing consequences to them. He controls the atmosphere, the earth, national boundaries, national prosperity, personal finances, health, physical characteristics of each person, placement of leaders, infrastructure, safety, and all other conditions in the world.

**God Raises Up or Brings Down, As He Pleases.** Prov. 22:2 tells us that “Rich and poor have this in common: The Lord is the Maker of them all.” God can give life and death, and lift up the poor, as we see in 1 Sam. 2:6-8, which says this:

The Lord brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up.  
The Lord sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor.

As you can imagine, God doesn't raise the poor up and give them rapid promotions or big raises, unless *all conditions are met* (and it is His will to do so). God created everything, and He now controls it all, so He can manipulate it, move it, multiply it, or make it disappear instantly. This means He can give you a position of honor and authority in a heartbeat, and He can remove it just as quickly. Jer. 27:5 says it this way, “With my great power and outstretched arm I made the earth and its people and the animals that are on it, and I give it to anyone I please.” He owns it...every bit of it...and He will distribute it as He pleases. Ps. 75:6-7 says this: “No one from the east or the west or from the desert can exalt a man. But it is God who judges: He brings one down, he exalts another.” The positions we hold in life are determined by God, and will not be sustained without His power and will. Remember that God's greatest interests for us are spiritual; other aspects, such as wealth, are secondary.

**God Looks for Humility.** God's placement of us into positions of prosperity depends on a number of characteristics and qualities in our “walk” with Him. The big condition God looks for is humility. Pride will bring us down, and humility qualifies us for elevation. In Dan. 4:37, King Nebuchadnezzar was speaking from experience when he said, “Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does

is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.” He had just spent seven years away from his position of authority, while God was teaching him that He alone places leaders. There are no self-made or self-appointed leaders. When someone is in a position of authority, it is because God put him there, and he will remove him at His pleasure.

We need to clarify one thing: When we talk about “leadership”, we must understand that God appoints leaders that fit His plan. If the person is an unbeliever, he will have no conditions for his appointment, except that God wants him there for His own purposes. The standards for unbelievers are not the same as they are for us. An unbeliever is a pawn in God’s larger “game”. He will place and use unbelievers as He chooses. God’s purpose for believers, on the other hand, is for them to glorify Him by living in the power of His Holy Spirit, so they can exhibit the character of Christ. When it comes to promotion, or advancement, or increased earnings, the believer will see these things come about only in accordance with God’s will, as part of God’s larger objective of facilitating our spiritual growth. And these will never happen for believers in the absence of humility. Unbelievers are a different category, and I have no doctrinal statement for them, except this: I hope they do well on earth...it’s all they have.

**God Elevates the Humble.** Is. 66:2 says “Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?” declares the Lord. “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.” God has His eye on those who are “humble”, and when the time is right, He will elevate them. 1 Pet. 5:6 admonishes us, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.” At the perfect time—if we are trusting—God will open the door, and that special relationship will appear, or the job or training program that you want will become available, or your personal finances will be increased, and so on, as these fit in with God’s plan for your perfection. God alone knows what we need and when a time is right for us to get something. But if we are proud and in a hurry, we will be chasing after the “finish” line, just to see it keep moving ahead of us.

Look at other conditions implied with humility. All of the doctrines we have studied about maturity and spirituality are seated in this one characteristic. Nothing we are asked to do that helps us get closer to God and walk with Him is not linked with humility. Examples: confession (I have sinned), study (teachability), faith (I can’t do it, but God can), prayer (Father, help me), and on it goes: acknowledgement, fear of the Lord, surrender, living in the power of the resurrection, and so on. So humility is not just shuffling our feet and saying, “Aw, shucks, it was nothin’.” It encompasses much more, including all the techniques we have learned throughout our studies in the Bible. Humility is the embodiment of our attitude toward God. If we see Him as unimportant or inconsequential, and ourselves as competent, we will never be “lifted up”. But if we are humble, then whatever God does with us, for us, and through us...is going to lift us up, as well as satisfy and glorify Him.

Ez. 17:24 gives us an illustration of His power to elevate or take down:

All the trees of the field will know that I the Lord bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it.

God has the power to take a person of low estate and lift him up into a position of prominence. And God says He not only “can” do it; he “will” do it. There is no limit to what God can do through someone who is fully surrendered to His plan and His will. That is the point we are trying to establish. When we can see that everything about our lives is connected to the way we are relating to God, and we take specific steps to let Him do His work through us, we will see Him work, and the work that’s done will have the effect of honoring God, lifting us up, and providing for other believers through our gifts.

God’s strength is made perfect in our weakness, as we see in 2 Cor. 12:9, where Paul said, “But he said to me, ‘My power is made perfect in weakness.’” When we are humble, God is able to work by His power, which is what it takes for divine production to be generated in our lives.

This point is driven home from a verse we have studied repeatedly in the past, James 4:6, which says, “But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” “More” grace is “superior” grace. There is a special provision that comes to the believer who is humble, walking in the Spirit, and walking by faith. That grace will give us more than we can imagine. 1 Cor. 2:9 describes this superior grace in action: “However, as it is written: ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.’” These things are primarily spiritual in nature, but—based on what we have seen that comes with “humility”—this can include provision and prosperity of all kinds.

It is interesting that we will have these things when they come into our lives to glorify God, and not just to make us feel better. When we put God first, the other things just fall into place. We will be equipped to do God’s will and exercise our gifts for the propagation of the gospel, the encouragement of fellow believers, and the inculcation of Bible truths into all believers. And we will be provided for.

In the study, *Maturity*, there is a chapter called “Humility”, which provides a thorough discussion of the concepts touched on in this study.

## God Teaches Us and Guides Us

**1 Cor. 2:1-16.** In 1 Cor. 2:1-16, Paul describes the way God reveals His truth by His Spirit. We ask you to read this passage in your Bible before you begin this study. For our part, we will enter comments that frame what we think this passage says. This section from Scripture fits in nicely with the concepts of God's plan that we have studied, and tells us how we can learn more about it. Here are our comments on this passage:

- Verses 1-5—Paul showed humility in his message to the Corinthians. He was coming to them from a perspective of weakness, rather than human wisdom. Paul did not advance high-flown postulates or abstruse philosophical conundrums. He preached only Jesus Christ, giving his message—not with his own brain power—but in the power of the Holy Spirit. He wanted their faith to rest on God's power and not man's wisdom. Paul pointed to God and His plan, and wanted the Corinthians to embrace God's way, rather than the ways of man.
- Verses 6-12—There is wisdom in God's plan, but it is *divine* wisdom, and some of the concepts in God's plan can only be understood by mature, spiritual believers. Human intelligence cannot grasp God's plan, nor can Satan and his fallen angels understand it. But God's wise plan was “destined for our glory before time began” (v. 7). This ties in with God's planning of all events in history, well before creation. God's plan is foreign to the perception of man. Such a plan cannot be *seen* or *heard* by our humanity, but it can be discerned by the Spirit within us.
- Verses 10b-16—The wisdom of God is taught to us through the Holy Spirit. He teaches *spiritual* truths in *spiritual* words that the *spiritual* man can understand. The *carnal* believer (and, of course, the unbeliever) cannot comprehend these truths, which includes the plan of God. Our puny human knowledge is meaningless to God, but He has given us the “mind of Christ”, which is all of His *teaching*, received by the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion—God has given us the ability to learn and understand His plan, but the process is *spiritual*, and requires fellowship, prayer, and faith, so that the spiritual truths will lodge in our souls and prepare us for spiritual service. To know God's plan and participate in it beneficially, we need to learn God's Word, where the plan is defined. Our responsibility is to learn His Word and follow His guidance as His plan is implemented in our lives.

**God Reveals His Secret Plan to Us.** Is. 55:8-9 tells us that God's thinking operates at a level that is much higher than ours. This passage says the following:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

But even though God's thoughts are higher than ours, He has given us enough in His Word for us to know how to live. We may think sometimes, “If God just revealed a little more of Himself,” or “if He would just tell me what to do,” then we could know for sure. But He has! The problem is not that He has not revealed Himself and His standards for our lives; it is our reluctance to take the time and use our discipline to study what He *has* given us. We have enough. And no matter what you know, or how mature you are, there's always something new to learn. God's Truth is endless.

Deut. 29:29 tells us that we won't know “everything”, but we will know “enough”. This passage says, “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.” God has revealed to the church what we need to know. He will not withhold what we require to live our lives in His power...if we want it. Amos 3:7 says, “Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.” And that plan has been codified in the Word that is in our possession today. The Word tells about the plan.

**We Must Be Seekers and Doers of the Word.** We have to seek His knowledge; it is not going to just drift into our souls. We must *ask* for knowledge and wisdom, so that our study time will be profitable. If we confess and pray and believe, God will teach us and we will get stronger—by His power—and our lives will begin to bear the fruit that He produces. Jer. 33:1-3 confirms this concept in the following:

While Jeremiah was still confined in the courtyard of the guard, the word of the Lord came to him a second time: “This is what the Lord says, he who made the earth, the Lord who formed it and established it—the Lord is his name: ‘Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.’”

When we learn, believe what we learn, and walk in the Spirit, we can apply what we know, and truly be living the Christian life. And this is worth emphasizing: It is not enough to sit through lessons on the Bible...we must *believe* what we hear, and *follow* the Word. Deut. 4:39-40 tells us to *keep* His Word, as we see in the following:

Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the lord is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other. Keep his decrees and commands, which I am giving you today, so that it may go well with you and your children after you and that you may live long in the land the Lord your God gives you for all time.

We must be “doers” of the Word...followers, keepers, and believers of the Word. Then God's Word will be a life-changing instrument that the Holy Spirit will use to transform us by renewing our minds. God's Word accomplishes what He wants, and fulfills God's plan for it (Is. 55:10-11). God's Word puts *wisdom* into us, as we see in Job 38:36, which asks the



question, “Who endowed the heart with wisdom or gave understanding to the mind?” That, of course, is God. He wants us to know...He is waiting for us to feed on His Word so we can understand His plan.

**God Guides Us.** God will guide us, as He did Moses. Moses sang this verse to the Lord: “In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling” (Ex. 15:13). God wants to guide us, as He did the Israelites in the desert: “By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night” (Ex. 13:21). And now we have the Word. This is our pillar of cloud and pillar of fire, but it will do us no good and we will have no guidance from it, if it is collecting dust on the shelf. We must “look” at it for it to guide us.

Statements and examples of God's guidance are seen throughout His Word. Here are a few of them that confirm that God will guide us:

- Num. 10:33—So they set out from the mountain of the Lord and traveled for three days. The ark of the covenant of the Lord went before them during those three days to find them a place to rest.
- Is. 58:11—The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.
- 2 Sam. 22:29—You are my lamp, O Lord; the lord turns my darkness into light.
- Jn. 16:13<sup>a</sup>—But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.
- Is. 48:17—This is what the Lord says—your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: “I am the Lord your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go.”

God offers guidance to us, but we have to receive it. That's always the problem, isn't it? God throws a banquet, but we just don't show up. Or if we do, we don't prepare ourselves for study by being purified and by praying for understanding. Ez. 33:31 paints a picture of the “hearers” only, saying, “My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain.” Sin, negative volition, and projection of a false image will prevent learning. God offers His Word to teach us, but few hear it *and* process it by believing it. Anyone can express “devotion” when it pleases the crowd, but putting His Word into daily *practice* is the key to living the Christian life.

**The Scripture Cannot Be Broken.** In Jn. 10:35<sup>b</sup>, Jesus said plainly, “The Scripture cannot be broken.” Of this verse, Keathley said the following:

*Bible Basics on Living in God's Plan: Pathway to Purpose*

This meant Scripture is true and that its principles and purposes are accurate. The Bible works in our lives when believed and applied, and whether man believes it or not, its principles are true, its record accurate, and what it promises will come to pass. Because of this, man is faced with the consequences of his unbelief or failure to live by faith in the teaching of the Bible. (Endnote 4)

When we fail to live by the Scripture, we will be operating completely in the flesh, not in the Spirit, because we won't know better. And remember, forgetting is an active process, which means you are forgetting all the time. In order to keep up, you have to study all the time to keep it fresh. If you are lazy, or do not have positive volition for the Word, God will not help you. When things get bad enough, come on back to the table.

**Get a Clue.** I came up with an acronym that expresses a sequence for learning and applying God's Word. The word is KLUWE, or "clue". We need to get a clue. These letters stand for the following:

K—Knowledge is what God knows and makes available to us as information from His Word.

L—Learning this "knowledge" introduces us to spiritual truths, as we absorb the Word through dedicated study.

U—Understanding comes when we hear the word and *believe* it. Faith turns the knowledge we have learned into understanding, processing it into our souls.

W—Wisdom is the accumulated and stored Word, giving us a mindset that equips us for living the Christian life in the power of the Spirit.

E—Expression of wisdom comes through application. When we have acquired wisdom, we will apply it in our lives, which will enable us to do the things we have learned: confess, pray, and study...all overarched by an abiding faith in the person and work of Christ and in His Father's Word.

Deut. 32:46-47 puts a cap on this study with the following:

...he said to them, "Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. They are not just idle words for you—they are your life. By them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess."

These are not just idle words...they are your life.

## **Flesh Cannot Please God**

**Nothing Good Comes from the Flesh.** The flesh is the same thing as the “sinful nature”. It is no surprise that the sinful nature cannot please God. What might be a little surprising is to know how much of our lives are controlled by the sinful nature, or the “flesh”. For some reason, we have fallen into thinking of the sinful nature as the source of sin, and the flesh as the source for “human good”, or “works of the flesh”. This distinction doesn’t hurt anything, probably, but there is *no difference!* Flesh and the sinful nature are the *same* in Scripture. And anything that comes from the “flesh” is sin. Period.

Rom. 8:8 says that nothing from the flesh, whether it is “sin” or “human good”, pleases God, as we see here: “Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.” It’s plain enough, then...if you are controlled by the sinful nature, you will *not* be controlled by the Holy Spirit, and you cannot please God. Our attempts to trust ourselves, or another man, or things in the world, will not please God, and will only lead to trouble. This is illustrated in 2 Chron. 16:7, which says the following:

At that time Hanani the seer came to Asa king of Judah and said to him: “Because you relied on the king of Aram and not on the Lord your God, the army of the king of Aram has escaped from your hand.”

**Faith in Self is Fleshly.** By living in the world all our lives, we are accustomed to trusting our own abilities to solve our problems and to live well. As believers, however, we live by new rules and in a new perspective, whether we embrace them or not. We have to learn that we will not attain spiritual peace or see divine production from our flesh, and we cannot overcome sin by trusting in the very part of ourselves that *loves to sin*.

If we are going to do “good”, or avoid “sin”, we have to do things God’s way, and that way will only be acquired by child-like faith in Him...our intelligence does not contribute. Jesus recognized this when He prayed the following:

I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure (Lk. 10:21*b*).

Self-effort disrupts and hinders spirituality. When we think about holiness or sanctification or purity, or even spirituality, we tend to see things at ground level, and see purity as something **we** do, rather than something God does. As we grow, we tend to see things more and more from God’s view point, and we understand increasingly our inability to do anything that will please God. Any effort to make ourselves worthy of Him, through good behavior or good deeds, has just the opposite effect. Man himself can do nothing to please God. Flesh produces only sin and self-dependency. These are things that disengage us from the true source of all goodness and love, which is God Himself.

**Our Way vs. God's Way.** When we choose the flesh over the Spirit, and when we choose our way, rather than God's way, things can get rough for us. Prov. 1:24-31 gives us the following:

But since you rejected me when I called and no one gave heed when I stretched out my hand, since you ignored all my advice and would not accept my rebuke, I in turn will laugh at your disaster; I will mock when calamity overtakes you—when calamity overtakes you like a storm, when disaster sweeps over you like a whirlwind, when distress and trouble overwhelm you. Then they will call to me but I will not answer; they will look for me but will not find me. Since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the Lord, since they would not accept my advice and spurned my rebuke, they will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes.

If we are not pleasing God, even when we are “trying”, we will hit wall after wall and wonder why nothing seems to work out. We know that God is good, so the problem has to be with us. Prov. 29:1 warns us not to ignore God's way, saying, “A man who remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will suddenly be destroyed—without remedy.” Being stiff-necked means having negative volition toward the Word of God. If we desire God's truth, and seek it, and hear it, and absorb it, and apply it, then we will be pleasing God, rather than drawing His rebuke.

1 Thess. 4:1 and 4:5-8 tell us what we must do to stay on track. We will quote these passages as one paragraph in the following:

Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more....not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.

Stay pure and keep on being instructed. Otherwise the “flesh” will assume command, and prevent our pleasing God. Keathley said this about walking in the flesh:

Those who are in the flesh and do not know God (unbelievers), or those who are walking by the flesh (carnal believers) are incapable of pleasing God. Spirit filled believers are the only ones who have the spiritual capacity to please the Lord. These are those who manifest the fruit of the Spirit. (Endnote 5)

The Word confirms that those controlled by the flesh cannot please God, so we should, instead, “live by the Spirit”. This is what we see in Gal. 5:16-17, as follows:

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is

*Bible Basics on Living in God's Plan: Pathway to Purpose*

contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.

If we hope to please God, we must live by the Spirit, to keep the flesh out of the way.

## Staying on the Good Track

**The “Good Track” is Fellowship.** Staying on the “good track” translates as “staying in fellowship”, or “walking in the Spirit”. By the filling and controlling of the Spirit, we do things right, please God, and see the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. We have seen this continually in all of our series, and it is part of our understanding of God’s plan, because it is central to our Christian walk and service. We *can* walk alone, with all due deference to the song that says we never will. But even if we don’t walk alone, it is possible to walk without God, in which case we will be walking in circles, or perhaps on a treadmill, where we are taking steps but getting nowhere.

**Continuing an Earlier Call for Us to be “Doers” of the Word.** We saw in the last chapter that our flesh cannot please God, and in the chapter before that, we saw the value of assimilating Scripture to understand God’s plan, get His guidance, and learn techniques for staying close to Him. The considerations in both of those chapters will come into play in this one, as we look at additional ways for us to be “doers” of the Word by keeping the Spirit in control of our lives.

The first chapter of James provides our introduction to this topic, which instructs us to be “doers”...or followers...of the Word. James 1:21 says, “Therefore get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save [deliver] you.” This verse is loaded. The first thing we do is “get rid of all moral filth”, which we do by sitting in a straight chair in a dark room, lifting our feet off the floor, and repeating over and over, “filth, be gone...filth, be gone...” That will get rid of the evil that is within us and around us. Right? You know better. The first thing we do is *confess our sins*, which is the way we get God’s cleansing to qualify us for fellowship with Him. That is when the filling of the Spirit is restored. The second step is “humbly accept the word planted in you.” While we are in fellowship, we can then accept the Word, which means studying *and* believing it...not just hearing it.

As a result of confession and study, we will be ready to go to the next step, which is *application*. Verse 22 says “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” We are to apply what we have learned. For us that includes all the techniques we have learned from this and previous series. Verses 23-24 tells us what happens when we only “hear” the Word, but do not “do” what it says. These verses say this:

Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

If we do not process what we hear by faith, we will never be able to “do” the Word, because the nourishing, cleansing, strengthening, and guiding content of what we have heard will not be available. First, we *listen*, but then we must *believe* what we hear, so that the Word we

have heard will become part of us. Then the last step is to apply the Word. If we hear it only, and do not “accept” it into our souls by faith, we will certainly never “do” it. If the Word is not received, stored, and applied, we will be like the man who sees himself in the mirror, but then walks away and forgets what he looks like. What does this mean?

First of all, when we confront information from God’s Word, how does it portray us? What do we look like in the light of the Word? The Bible expresses God’s view point, which sees us as we are...weak, self-serving, and sinful creatures, often under the control of our sinful natures. The Bible is like a *mirror* that shows us our sins, so we can deal with them in the way God has prescribed (i.e., confession). But when we have not studied or have not believed the instructions of the Bible, we *forget what we look like*, and think we’re okay, thus having no need to confess our sins. We say, “Best I know, I’m alright.” But when we *apply* God’s Word by believing it and following it, we will see that we are *not* okay, and we will confess, and then pray, and then learn more, which we will apply more, and—by this—we will be moving closer to God. The Word will become part of us, and by applying it, we will walk in the Spirit and walk by faith and walk in His truth. That’s “doing” the Word...and it is much more than just hearing it.

By staying in the Word, we will see ourselves mirrored in a true reflection of our appearance, and we will stay pure by confession. And just because we slip does not mean that we surrender to sin, and give up on service to God. That is why we have confession...so we won’t give up. Grace has found a way to give us choice and the ability to fail, and yet has *provided a way* for God to overlook our failures to allow us to stay in His castle. This should encourage us, because we can be assured that—as long as we are alive—it is never too late to come back to God. No length of time or manner of misbehavior can separate us from His love...we can always confess and come home. What a gracious God! 1 Sam. 12:20 encourages us not to quit, saying, “Do not be afraid,” Samuel replied. “You have done all this evil; yet do not turn away from the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart.”

God is never shocked or taken off guard by our behavior. He knew about it before we were born. He knows we are weak. His Son especially understands our weakness, because He joined us in that weakness, even though He never gave in to it. God has planned to use our weakness to accomplish His purpose in His creation by infusing Himself into us and giving us the opportunity to surrender to His strength, in place of our own. His plan is to do through us what we could never do on our own, which is to love God and man, exhibit the character of Christ, and glorify God in our attitude and demeanor. That is why He set up procedures for us to access His power by relenting control to His Holy Spirit. Our hope is to understand this...and apply it...to enable the process to work in our lives.

**Gal. 5.** The fifth chapter of Galatians provides an excellent discussion of sin and legalism, on the one side, and the “filling of the Spirit” on the other. Rom. 8:5 gives a terse summary of this dichotomy, saying, “Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set

on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.” The split between control of the sinful nature and that of the Holy Spirit is clear and absolute. There is no halfway point or shade of gray. You are not “somewhat spiritual” or “somewhat carnal”. You are one or the other. We will see this separation more clearly in Gal. 5.

We are going to work through this entire chapter, and will not take up space on the pages here to duplicate it. So pick up your Bible and read Gal. 5, and then keep it handy as you work through this chapter. This chapter will tell us what it means to be filled by the Spirit and walk in dependence on His power, rather than our own. Here is what we find in Gal. 5, which combines some insights from Marvin Effa (Endnote 6) with our own study:

- Verse 1 tells us we are free because Christ has set us free. Freedom in Christ means not having to memorize 600 plus laws or make efforts to follow them. We are liberated from having to keep the law, which was a form of slavery.
- Verse 2 shows Paul giving great emphasis to a point he wants to bring home. He is saying, “This is important!” And then he makes His point: “if you let yourself be circumcised,” and are trying to be holy and righteous in this way, “Christ will be of no value to you at all.” Why? Because legalism is a *sin*, an activity of the sinful nature (the flesh), and will put you out of fellowship and bar the power of the Holy Spirit in your life. Christ will not help us if we do not “stand firm” (from v.1), which means to stand fast in our liberty. Vacating our freedom causes us to lose fellowship and divine assistance.
- Verses 3 and 4 tell us that—if we try to keep the law (which means, inevitably, that you keep the laws you pick because you like them)—you have to obey *every single one of them*. And of course, we can’t do that. Those who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ. They have lost fellowship with the Spirit of Christ, because they have committed the sin of legalism, and they are not receiving the grace that comes to believers in fellowship. This does not mean, of course, that they are not still saved, only that their spiritual power flow has been disrupted.
- Verse 5 shows how faith in the Spirit gives us an expectation that the righteousness of Christ will be seen in our behavior. The issue is this: If we trust in ourselves to produce this righteousness, it will not happen; if we trust in the Holy Spirit to produce the righteousness of Christ, it will be done.
- Verse 6 informs us of the following: Since we are believers, keeping the law will get us zip. The only thing that counts for us is our abiding faith that comes with being in fellowship and maturing through study and training. The ultimate result is divine love, coming through us.



*Bible Basics on Living in God's Plan: Pathway to Purpose*

- Verses 7-12 show Paul saying, essentially, “You are being pulled aside by false teachers, who convince you that keeping the law leads to spirituality. Their ideas are false; keeping the law leads to carnality.”
- Verse 13 warns us not to “use our freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.” Freedom from having to keep the law does not give us license to sin. Sin, whether it is in the form of legalism...or immorality...is still sin, and truncates fellowship and the control of the Spirit.
- Verses 14-15 give a summary of the whole law in one command. “Love your neighbor as yourself.” To do otherwise leads to destructive relationships and sinful behavior.
- Verse 16 gives the other side of the coin. The first side was, “Okay, you can place yourself under the law, or indulge yourself and sin. But both of these keep you away from the power of grace and nothing good can come from it. The conclusion is this: “So, I say, live by the Spirit.” Living by the Spirit is the result of confession and ongoing faith, and is the opposite of living under the law.
- Verse 17-24 distinguishes walking in the flesh from walking in the Spirit. “If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law” (v. 18). These Galatians were indwelt by the Spirit because they were believers, but they had stepped away from the Spirit by trying to keep the law. Get this: the minute they tried to DO SOMETHING to please God because of rules, they separated themselves from God’s power. Will they sin if led by the Spirit? No! Will they love if they are led by the Spirit? Yes! Because the Spirit does for them and through them what they cannot do for and by themselves.
- Verse 25 tells us that when we “live by the Spirit”, we also “walk in the Spirit”. One is an internal condition...the other is visible. As long as we are filled with the Spirit, we will be walking in the Spirit.
- Verse 26 shows this external outcome of a changed internal condition. We will not live in sin, but in love. That is the fruit of the Spirit, visible to all.

This is God’s plan for ongoing spirituality, or control of the Spirit. We confess to get the filling of the Spirit, and we trust to keep walking in the Spirit. This is not something we do this second, or on Sunday morning, or occasionally. This is our life. Without these spiritual components being exercised in all aspects of our lives, no good thing will get done...we will not please God, and life will be a constant struggle. God’s grace, which is seen in His plan, has given us a way to live that depends on Him. This is the plan we must follow, and the grace we must access...all the time.

**Drawing Near to God.** Eph. 3:12 says, “In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.” You remember previous studies, where we discussed the process for drawing closer to God’s throne to receive mercy and grace. Heb. 4:16 sums it up for us, saying, “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” James 4:8 gives us the condition for this, as follows: “Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” Ps. 24:3b-4a caps it with this: “Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart.”

Here’s the picture. We sin, virtually non-stop. But we want to get closer to God. We have confidence that we can “approach” the throne of grace, where we find mercy (the forgiveness of our sins and restoration to fellowship) and grace to help us in our needs (the outpouring of God’s spiritual—and other—provisions for us). But we first have to have “clean hands and a pure heart”. That means all of our sins have to be confessed. We can’t experience the *grace* until we have confessed, thereby accessing the *mercy*. When we have confessed, we obtain mercy, and get the benefits of grace, and the difference this makes cannot be measured by human metrics. We get the infinite power of the Holy Spirit, and the love that comes with it. Then we can draw near to God in the Most Holy Place, where we can speak to Him directly. So we must do as it says in the following from Heb. 10:22:

Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

Everywhere in Scripture, we see that our connection with God is based on our being pure. Confession is often ignored, but *it is central to our spirituality*. We cannot ignore this provision that God has given us, because we cannot fulfill any of the other conditions, or use any of the other techniques, until this one is satisfied. This includes prayer, study, operation of our gifts, worship, fear of the Lord, and faith. We can’t live the Christian life without confession. God, help us to see this in churches across this land. Otherwise, we will continue to be a nation of wanna-be’s.

When we talk about the components of living the Christian life as God wants it, it seems that we always “feature” the topic we are discussing, making it sound superlative and singularly important. Examples are prayer, study, faith, and so on. But we can conclude right now that the most important thing you can do as a believer is to confess your sins. Period. Then we look for number 2, or the next most important thing, which is probably prayer, because we can’t do anything beyond confession without prayer, including our learning of the Word. So we finish this discussion of our staying on the “good track” in God’s plan by looking briefly at prayer.

**Remember to Pray.** This is what we do at the throne of grace: We pray. Deut. 4:7 says, “What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?” But we have learned that we must meet the conditions

*Bible Basics on Living in God's Plan: Pathway to Purpose*

for prayer, if we are going to pray. And we MUST PRAY, or we are sinning by *not praying*. We see this in 1 Sam. 12:23, which shows Samuel saying, “As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right.” Praying is something we are commanded to do. Not to do it is a sin. But we must first meet the conditions for prayer, so we offer these again, taken from the book, *Being Devoted to Prayer*.

Here are the conditions for prayer that we must meet for our prayers to be effective:

- Have all known sins confessed.
- Be controlled by the Spirit, or walking in the spirit, as a result of ongoing faith following confession.
- Forgive others, because bad relations hinder prayer.
- Walk as Jesus walked, in utter dependence on His Father.
- Pray in the authority of Jesus, i.e., being “clothed” with Him and praying “within Him and His character”, which can only be done when we are filled with the Holy Spirit.
- Pray in faith. Faith must always precede prayer. The “prayer of faith” of a maturing believer will get results.
- Give attention to God’s Word. Refusal to study brings God’s refusal to hear our prayers.
- Be humble, acknowledging God’s greatness and our inadequacy.
- Pray according to God’s will. To do this we must do the following: know His Word, believe God and His Word, and submit to His will.

For a more complete discussion on the topic of prayer, please see the study, *Being Devoted to Prayer*. In that study, in the chapter, “Praying According to God’s Will”, we stated this:

Why pray? Because *prayer makes us a part of God’s plan* in a way that enables us to access His power to fulfill His purposes. Prayer conveys submission to His will and His plan, and honors Him as the Planner and the Overseer of the Plan.

Prayer is what we do when we are close to God. It is the ultimate form of fellowship, and our greatest asset as we look for ways to stay on the “good track”.

## Faith in God's Plan

**A God We Can Believe In.** Faith is a source of knowledge. Just as we perceive the world through our senses, we perceive God through faith. All the Bible study, prayer, church attendance, and Christian service we can ever do will have no value unless they operate within a belief that God exists, and that He means what He says in His Word. Unless every step in our Christian growth is accompanied by faith, we will be halted on the trail and assaulted by those who want to destroy the truth. Faith is the key to salvation, and the component that determines the nature and quality of our lives and service *after* salvation. Heb. 11:6 says it perfectly, "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." When we come to God, we must bring faith with us.

The object of our faith is Jesus Christ, our Savior. We also trust His Father and His Spirit...and His Word. We come to Him in confession as we approach Him, and know He is there. And we come before Him in prayer, knowing that He exists. We come to the living God, sincerely and heartily and enthusiastically seeking His grace (which does *not* mean casually, or occasionally, or incidentally *checking in*, known as giving a "nod to God"); we come to Him, because we believe that He *is*, and that He is *good*. We know we can trust in what He has told us, and that the things that He promises will come to pass.

We trust in God, not just because He exists, or because He is good, but also because He has the means to carry out what He says. He is the all-powerful God with a comprehensive plan for all time and eternity. And He can carry it out by His power and wisdom. Is. 26:4 says, "Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord, is the Rock eternal." He is the eternal Constant and the Originator of the universe. He is One we can trust. 2 Chron. 20:12b shows a piece of a prayer for deliverance, offered by Jehoshaphat, "For we have no army to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you." When our options are exhausted, we know that we can turn our eyes toward God and humbly pray; He will provide what we need, if we trust Him.

2 Chron. 14:11-12 illustrates how our faith in God should operate in life. These verses give us the following:

Then Asa called to the Lord his God and said, "Lord, there is no one like you to help the powerless against the mighty. Help us, O Lord our God, for we rely on you, and in your name we have come against this vast army. O Lord, you are our God; do not let man prevail against you.

We have seen this passage before, and you probably remember that God, indeed, delivered the Israelites from the Cushites, in response to their "prayer of faith" and acknowledgement of God. That's a powerful combination. There is no problem we face that is not part of God's plan, and our attitude toward any problem...meaning our belief that either the

problem has the power, or God has the power...will determine the outcome of the problem. God is the only One Who can solve it or overpower it.

**Faith Gives Access to Grace.** Rom. 5:1-2 discloses that faith gives us access to God's grace, the source of "rewards" for those who "seek Him". Here is what this passage says:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

These verses show how faith carries us through all three phases of our salvation:

- Justification—We are justified through faith, receiving the righteousness of Christ when we accept Him as our Savior.
- Access—We have access by faith into the grace that saved us and in which we now "stand", or *live*. This is the life of the believer lived by faith.
- Glory—Our future consists of glory, which will come to us in the form of glorified bodies and eternal life with Him in heaven.

The aspect of our salvation that we are focused on here is "access" into God's grace. That grace was the medium for our going from being condemned, to being justified. Now, this grace is our true north, as we seek guidance and provision as believers on the sea of life. We have seen in previous studies a reference to "access" for believers. Access is linked to our "approaching" the throne of grace, to "receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need" (Heb. 4:16). We saw clearly that "receiving mercy" was getting forgiveness for our sins. This qualifies us to "find grace". When we confess, we are free to enter the Most Holy Place, where the "throne" sits; that is where grace will be found that can help us.

But Rom. 5:1-2 above tells us that the condition for access to grace in our Christian lives is *faith*. We access God's throne by faith, just as we were justified by faith at salvation. There seems to be a conflict concerning the criterion for access to grace. We have emphasized before the role of *confession* in getting access to grace, and here we see an emphasis on *faith*. But confession and faith actually work together. We correctly assumed in previous studies that confession would restore the control of the Holy Spirit, with the result that faith would be present. We know that faith is a natural by-product of fellowship, and that fellowship qualifies us for access to the throne. So if we are in fellowship, faith will be there, so is there a problem? Yes. The problem is *staying* in fellowship. This is important: There is a faith that keeps us in fellowship, and perpetuates our walk in the Spirit.

We saw in our study *Walking by Faith* that faith has various levels of strength, depending on our maturity. This means we will not be staying in the Most Holy Place for very long, if our faith is not strong. Get this: Access is more than *entry*...it is *occupation*, or "ongoing access". Access cannot be predicted to be sustained if faith is weak. Hence, we see our need to

concentrate on strengthening our faith to maintain access to grace, where the help is. Faith is an important sequel to confession (confession, of course, qualifies us to enter in the first place). Faith will lengthen our stay. Faith is also the condition that allows us to “enter God’s rest”, which is related to our being in the Most Holy Place.

Eph. 3:12 seals this concept for us saying, “In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.” We see this verse more clearly now, and understand it to say that the more faith we have, the greater *freedom* and *confidence* we will have to stop and *rest* in the Most Holy Place, where we can worship, pray, and enjoy the benefits of grace. And with increased maturity, leading to greater faith, we will learn to live there, where we will find superior grace and will lack nothing (Ps. 34:9 cf. James 4:6).

**Faith As Small As a Mustard Seed.** In Matt. 17:20, Jesus said the following:

Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, “move from here to there” and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.

Notice the sequence: First you have the faith, i.e., you bring faith with you to the event; and then the event happens...or does *not* happen, depending on God’s plan. But if we bring faith to an event, God’s plan will be fulfilled and nothing will be impossible.

Please pay attention to this next point: The faith that moves mountains is not faith in the outcome of the mountain moving, but in the One Who made the mountain, knowing that God will move the mountain if it fits His will. He may move “another” mountain, and not the one we see, but His action, the unfolding of His plan corresponding with our faith, will probably have *some* mountain *moving*. The action of God is not correlated with our faith in an OUTCOME, but in the One who DETERMINES the outcome. The expression of our faith is to surrender to the outcome He chooses, because it is the best one.

We can know at all times that God is working His plan, and that we are part of it. There are *some* outcomes that are more predictable. For example, He will always give us what we ask for if He has promised it, such as giving us wisdom if we ask for it in faith (James 2:5); or He will meet our needs if we stay in fellowship with Him and are walking by faith (Phil. 4:18-19). We should remember, though, that it is God Who defines what our needs are.

The point is this: We must bring strong faith to *every* event. But such a faith does not come from a “will to believe”, as much as it does a “will to study” and draw closer to God. To say, simply, “I think I’m going to have faith,” or “I want to believe,” does not generate that faith. Faith for the believer is a spiritual condition, developed through spiritual processes, including study of the Word and patiently enduring God’s training program. There is a *decision* to believe in every case...that’s for sure...but that decision will only be efficacious if we make many other decisions along the way to grow and mature. When we do this, our faith will build up...the kind of faith that will enable God to use us as instruments for

implementation of His plan. But our faith should always be directed toward God, and not at outcomes. Without Him, there is no good outcome.

**Faith and Our Walk in the Holy Spirit.** We want to highlight the importance of our walking by faith as the means for our walking in the Holy Spirit. We receive the filling of the Holy Spirit when we confess our sins. But this is intermittent, depending on whether it is interrupted by sin or not...and, of course, it will be. It is faith, however, that sustains our walk, once we are in fellowship, and the duration of our "time under the control of the Spirit" will be determined by the strength of that faith. The stronger the faith, the longer the time of our fellowship.

In the study, *Walking by Faith*, we provided a thorough discussion of all aspects of faith, including the role of faith in enabling us to walk in the Spirit. We conclude our current study with a quote from that book, as seen in a chapter titled, "Living by Faith":

We begin fellowship by confessing; then we continue spirituality by staying focused on God. This focus is an ongoing and pervasive attitude of faith toward God. This is fear of the Lord, occupation with Christ, acknowledging God, surrender, submission to God's will, and God-consciousness, all brought to a fine point in a thing called faith. This is turning ourselves over to God, with all our problems, our aspirations, our dreams, our hopes, and our intentions. We relinquish control to Him and keep on trusting Him to sustain us by His Spirit.

Rom. 6:12-13 gives us a Scriptural frame for this concept:

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.

This is what we are to do: *offer*. We offer our bodies as instruments of righteousness. We become God's tools to do His work. We surrender our will to His. We relinquish control to the Holy Spirit. We trust in His power to get the job done. We give our lives up to allow His life to be produced in us. We let Him be God...in us. Then sin will not be our master, because we will be operating in the realm of grace, where God's provision sustains us. (Rom. 6:14).

## Commitment

**Commitment is Not a Single Event.** Everything in the Christian life comes down to a “yes” or “no” response to God. Once we give the big “yes” to God to place Jesus Christ into our hearts, we are then confronted with a life-long series of choices that require a “yes” or a “no” answer. These measure into the millions every day. Life comes at us so fast that we are virtually inundated with events and ideas, known in psychology as “stimuli”. These bombard our consciousness with an endless array of input and images that challenge us to keep up.

After the storm hits is no time for us to try to figure out what the plan is. We have to be prepared. Commitment requires preparation, COPIOUS AMOUNTS OF PREPARATION, so that we can be trained to respond affirmatively to God in all situations. If we are not prepared, we will only “react” to events in knee-jerk fashion, and respond like any unbeliever...with trust in man or the world or self...and with an expression of doubt and questioning toward God. Commitment is knowing the plan, and being dedicated to its existence, purpose, and execution.

**Commitment: The General View.** When we grow, the responses we make will become more consistently positive. Positive responses show faith, surrender, confession, acknowledgement of God, being still, waiting on the Lord, thanksgiving, prayer, humility, submission to God's will, knowing the power of the resurrection of Christ, walking in the Spirit, learning the Word, believing God's promises, and living in God's plan. And now, there is one more thing that is going to step one yard past all of these; it is *commitment* to God's plan. This is the final brick in the superstructure that makes up the life and mind of a mature believer. Once we understand that God's plan is operating all around us, we can exhibit the ultimate state of faith by committing to that plan.

Commitment is the accumulated set of positive responses we make to all of life's circumstances, knowing that everything that happens is part of the plan of God. Every single thing that happens in our lives is part of God's plan, and our acceptance of each one of these, with gratitude and peace, shows that we are committed to the plan. When we can see God's plan flowing like a river, we can see it moving past us, and we can let those things that seem unpleasant come and go in peace. When it is God's will that we suffer so that He can steer us toward Him, we remain committed. If we do, peace will endure.

Commitment is not a single choice, like believing is at salvation. It is many choices, made over time. It is channeling our choices into a positive vein of faith. It is submitting our will to the will of God. It is relaxing our hearts into His rest. It is succumbing to the flow of His plan. It is seeing beyond what our eyes can take in...to the Mover behind the scene ...believing that what we see on the surface is the *pretend*, and knowing that the *real* is actually hidden from view.



These generalities grow out of all the particulars that we have studied, summarized as confessing, praying, studying, and trusting. When these are taken together, along with God's training, the stage will be set for the next step. This is what's next: repeated and ongoing commitment to what He has structured for the universe, and for us within it.

Reaching maturity and knowing God's planning process gives us His viewpoint, and instills confidence that everything that happens is "by design", and "under control". When we have this confidence, we can commit to the plan. But sometimes, we feel that things are out of hand, or that God has forgotten us, or that He is not being fair. Most of the time, when we are struggling, it is because of our own failure to choose Him, but even if what we see is totally unexplainable, He is still in charge, His plan is still working, and the plan will not fail. The plan is perfect. We can commit to it: breathe, watch, trust, enjoy, and wait. God is working, and when we work with Him, we can have the best life available to fallen man...right here in our time, and in our space.

By sorting and properly arranging our priorities, we will learn to choose a peaceful commitment to each event God brings to us. This is the peace we can't understand, but that God offers: when we let the weight of our minds and bodies rest on God's infinitely powerful plan. The plan will ferry us, and we will arrive on time.

**Seeking and Choosing "First Things".** From the first glimmer of interest in the earliest embryo of our positive volition, to the pinnacle of maturity and faith, we must always be seeking God, searching His will, scoping His plan, surveying His truth. If we seek God, choose God, believe God...if we are DEVOTED to Him...He will absolutely *take care of us*. We have the benefit of closeness to God on one side, and the bounty of His provision on the other. We are doubly blessed. Scripture is clear about this principle, as we see in Matt. 6:19-24, which says the following:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where you treasure is, there your heart will be also. The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness! No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

We must choose God...be devoted to Him. Or we will be in the darkness. Darkness is seen again and again in the Bible as a place apart from fellowship with God. And no deliveries can be made in the dark, so God's provision will not be available. The world may kick a few things our way in the darkness, but these are not from God and will not satisfy. There is no substitute for fellowship with God.

On the other hand, if we follow all the techniques we have learned, we will see God giving us *everything* we need. The punch line for the passage above is seen in this same chapter (ch. 6 in Matthew), where Jesus gives us our greatest challenge and His most reassuring promise, in verse 33: “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” His kingdom is His PLAN, expressed as His POWER, and His righteousness is His PURITY, which comes to us through confession. This kingdom (the term has more than one application) is here *now*...and this righteousness can exist *in our lives*. This is what we are seeking. And when seeking God is *first* on our list of things to do, the supply lines will be open.

**Aspects of Commitment.** There are many pieces to commitment. We said already that “commitment” is a string of decisions to choose God—to be committed to His plan every day—in the heat of battle. When we add up every single study we have done in all the previous series, they add up to one culminating objective: commitment to God. And this one thing has aspects; here are a couple: 1) submitting our bodies to God, and 2) loving God without reservation.

Submitting our Bodies to God. 1 Cor. 6:20 says, “You were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.” Rom. 6:11b-14 echoes this command, giving us the following:

...count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.

When we offer our bodies to God, we do so because we are free to operate under His grace, *not* because we are embracing a code that we are conscripted to live by. We are not tethered to the Law, as the Law cannot keep us from sinning, but we are tied to grace, which is where we find the power of God to overcome sin. Verses 11-14 above are talking about living on earth, where we have the freedom and opportunity to submit ourselves to God. The distinction between slavery to the Law, and the freedom of grace, can be seen in the following side-by-side comparison:

<b>Don't Have to Do These</b>	<b>But We are Free to Do These</b>
Keep the law	Free to beat sin
Tithe	Free to give
Offer sacrifices	Free to praise
Keep the Sabbath	Free to worship
Wear the Law on our foreheads	Free to study the Word
Confess our sins through sacrifices	Free to confess directly to God

When we are submitting ourselves to God, including our bodies, we will be using the freedom of grace to do the things that bring honor to God. This is because we choose God.

Loving God Without Reservation. As we mature, love becomes increasingly the way we think and operate. We ultimately learn to love God with every blink, or breath, or thought, or beat of our hearts. Mark 12:30 calls on us to *love* God this way, saying, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” Keathley provides some insights into this passage, which we blend with our own in the following:

- **Heart.** Heart-love is fellowship with God, our inner person wanting God and relating to Him as our Father, and staying close to Him by confessing our sins.
- **Soul.** Soul-love is submission of our bodies to God, along with our physical lives and our self-concepts. This is commitment...giving our lives to God.
- **Mind.** Mind-love is commitment to God through faithful study of His Word. Our ideas, viewpoint, and perspective are characterized by our not leaning on our own understanding, but acting in alignment with God's Word (Rom. 12:2).
- **Strength.** Strength-love includes surrender of our abilities, talents, gifts, and physical powers. Our strength yields to His power by faith. This is the commitment of trust in Him. (Endnote 7)

**Commitment to God's Plan.** Is. 57:19b-21 shows the contrast between accepting and rejecting God and His plan. This passage says the following:

“Peace, peace, to those far and near”, says the Lord. “And I will heal them.” But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. “There is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked.”

*Bible Basics on Living in God's Plan: Pathway to Purpose*

We talked earlier about the rest and peace of committing to God's plan, and here we have that idea confirmed. We will find peace, a sense of well-being and comfort, when we commit our hearts and souls and minds to God, with full confidence that the One with the plan...is the One Who can. But if we reject God's plan, and ignore the Creator and our Savior, we will have no peace. The application we are making here is for believers: These are saved, born again, regenerated, adopted, justified *believers* who HAVE NO PEACE, as long as they choose to depend on anything besides God.

God controls everything. (Did we mention that?) Is. 45:7, and 23-24, distinguishes what happens to those who are committed to God, vs. those who sign up for other sources for meaning and sustenance. Here is what these verses give us, quoted as a single paragraph:

I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things. By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear. They will say of me, "In the Lord alone are righteousness and strength." All who have raged against him will come to him and be put to shame.

God forms the light, which is the place where we will be if are committed to His plan. There we will enjoy prosperity, find His righteousness, and experience His strength. If we choose the darkness, we will see that the outcomes of His plan bring only misfortune to us. We will see disaster, and will be put to shame. Eventually, every knee will bow, and every tongue will declare His glory...but for now, we have a choice. To choose God over and over is to invite His prosperity, righteousness, and strength. To go negative on God is a sure path to ruin.

Commitment to God's plan is also seen as surrender to His power and control. In *Being Devoted to Prayer*, "Praying According to God's Will", we described the kind of surrender that God accepts, as follows:

Everything we have studied and are asked to do is enfolded within the concept of surrender. Confession, humility, fear, trust, occupation with Christ, God-consciousness, acknowledgement, and so on...all of these boil down to one thing: surrender. We surrender to allow God to conquer our minds and bodies. We become His vessels, His tools, His temple. We surrender by relinquishing our wills to him, and we relinquish because we trust, and we trust because we know God, and we know God because we have seen Him in His Word, and we see the truth in His Word because we believe what He says, and we learn what He says because His Holy Spirit teaches us, and the Holy Spirit teaches us because we are cleansed, so He can control us and instruct a willing pupil. It's all about surrender.

Surrender is central to commitment. When we are truly committed to God's plan, every event in our lives will be an occasion for believing that God is sufficient to handle all our problems. I Pet. 4:19 encourages us to stay committed, no matter what, saying, "So, then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator

and continue to do good.” We should continue our commitment to the Creator, and maintain our persistence in following God’s techniques for living, even when suffering is intense and painful. Nothing that happens is accidental; God planned it all.

**Committing Our Plans to God.** If God likes our plans, He will sustain and direct us. Ps. 37:23a says, “If the Lord delights in a man’s way, he makes his steps firm....” God supports a plan, when He thinks it has merit. When we talk about plans that God likes, we are thinking of those that are generated through the techniques that enable us to be productive in the power of His Holy Spirit. God is the source of ALL good, and a good plan from us will be one that originally came from Him. When a plan is part of His plan...He likes it.

The more our planning *focuses* on Him, the more it *depends* on Him. The more it seeks to honor Him and His Word, the more likely it is that it will have meaning in the flow of *His* plan. It is His plan that we trust, perceiving through our dim understanding that He made everything and He directs everything. We choose, but we do not impact His plan. The plan is turn-key, shovel-ready, and set-in-stone. Our plans only have value when they become part of *His* plan.

**Prov. 16:1-3.** This passage gives us a great deal of information regarding our plans and God’s plan, and points us in the direction of profitable participation in the “big” plan, by being committed to it. We will go through this passage a verse at a time. Some of the ideas presented from this passage came from Hampton Keathley, III. Here is what we see in this passage:

- Prov. 16:1. “To man belong the plans of the heart, but from the Lord comes the reply of the tongue.” This tells us that the plans we make actually belong to us. We make plans; it is our purview to make plans. We just have to make sure we are planning in the right way. Notice the word “heart”. This has to do with our inner objective. Plans based on selfish gain will not succeed. But when we commit our plans, both in their formation and execution, to God, they will succeed. When we are truly committed to the Lord, He will work everything into *His* plan, making our plan fulfill *His* purposes and ends. Now notice the phrase, “reply of the tongue”. This deals with our statements and actions, to which God will respond. Our abilities cannot guarantee success; only God can make our plans succeed or fail. Prov. 16:9 says, “In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps.” God determines *outcomes*.
- Prov. 16:2. “All a man’s ways seem innocent to him but motives are weighed by the Lord.” God evaluates not just what we say or do, but our motives. Are we seeking God and His kingdom first? Are we searching for His will? Are we panting after God the way a deer pants after water? Are we looking for a path that leads closer to Him? Or are we preoccupied with ourselves and our own personal aggrandizement and selfish consumption? And are we trying to excuse ourselves

by ignoring God and His standards? God knows *exactly* what we are up to, and some day our motives will all be exposed. This is what we see in 1 Cor. 4:5b, which says, “He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts. At that time each will receive his praise [evaluation] from God.”

- Prov. 16:3. “Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed.” This goes along with “seeking first the kingdom of God”. Commitment to God comes FIRST. If that step is not taken, there will be no peace, no rest, no success, no fulfillment, no satisfaction, no reward, no superior grace, no “above all we think or ask” provision, no fruit, no power, and no clue as to what went wrong. Whatever you plan, give it to God. “Commit” means to roll everything we do onto the Lord. When we are committed to Him, our plans will succeed because He is involved. When we look away from Him, we are on our own, and for us there will be no rest. (Endnote 8)

**A Final Charge to Commit Our Plans to God.** Ps. 37:5-6 offers clear instructions on what we are to do regarding our plans, saying, “Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.” *Proviso* first: “Commit your way to the Lord” and “trust in him.” *Provision* next: “He will make your righteousness shine” and “the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.” Commit and trust, and God will empower you to live righteously, and will cause your plan (your “cause”) to succeed. This is a promise, from the one Who *can* fulfill it, and Whose promise says He *will*.

The next verse in Ps. 37 (v. 7) calls for us to “be still” and “wait patiently for him”. We have seen this before. And we have learned to confess, study, pray, and trust. We also understand that we are to submit to God’s will and surrender to His power. Now we are ready to take the final step by committing our plans...and our “planning”...to God. We are thinking creatures, and the world shapes our thinking from birth with the view that we are the center of the universe and that we must depend on our own calculations and machinations for success. When our thoughts are focused on ourselves and the world, however, we are facing away from God, and our plans are dependent on our own intelligence, initiative, and abilities. This is a plan for failure...disaster. This is why our minds must be renewed, so we can be transformed by *His* might and move into the flow of His plan.

**When Our Plans Start to Resemble God’s Plan....** The more our thoughts are filled with God, the more we will make plans that correspond with His plans. Good planning is like good praying, or praying according to God’s will. We can “plan according to God’s will”. We will get better at this as we mature and have greater faith and wisdom and surrender. At some point, our plans will overlay God’s will, and we will see *His* plan generate its greatest benefits...for us, and for all those we will serve as part of the plan.

**Verses on Being Committed to God's Plan.** Here are some verses to firmly establish our understanding of our responsibility to plan within God's plan, and to commit to Him in everything we do:

- Ps. 37:5—Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.
- Prov. 16:3—Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed.
- 1 Pet. 4:19—So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.
- Rom. 6:13—Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.
- James 4:7a—Submit yourselves, then, to God.
- Heb. 12:9—Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live!
- Rom. 10:3—Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.
- Job 22:21—Submit to God and be at peace with him; in this way prosperity will come to you.
- 2 Chron. 30:8—Do not be stiff-necked, as your fathers were; submit to the Lord. Come to the sanctuary, which he has consecrated forever. Serve the Lord your God, so that his fierce anger will turn away from you.
- Ps. 81:11-12—But my people would not listen to me; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to follow their own devices.

Commitment parallels maturity. As we grow, our equipment to relate to and serve God increases, and our commitment to His way gets stronger. We cannot resolve our need to commit to Him in one day. But we can begin today with a decision that the way of commitment is the way we will travel, and that we are going to find the way to understand, follow, support, and commit to God's plan. Any other way leads into a brick wall.

**Commit.** Surrender your strength, submit your bodies, give your hearts, and commit your plans...give it all to God. We may be afraid that—when we are finished—we will have

*Bible Basics on Living in God's Plan: Pathway to Purpose*

nothing left. But if we commit to God completely, will we have nothing? No. We will have everything. This is the plan.



## Concluding Remarks

We have seen that there is one God. If we are not sure on this point, the rest will have no meaning to us. When we come to God, it is because we seek Him, believing that He really exists.

God is the Creator and sustainer of the universe. He is all-powerful, timeless, and immutable. And He is good...loving, faithful, and patient...which is why He planned a way for fallen man to be saved through the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ. God is also all-knowing. There is not one thing He does not know, from the past or the present or the future. He knows the end from the beginning, and everything in between.

God also *controls* everything, but He decided before creation to give certain creatures free will, allowing them to accept or reject God. This was true of angels, as some followed Satan in his rebellion, and it is true of us, as some choose to reject the gospel and follow the pathway of Satan to hell. The big choice we have is to accept Christ and receive the gift of eternal life. After that, we enter the Christian life, which is where things get tricky. That is why we have written this study and all those that preceded it. We want to know Who this God is that has saved us, and what we should do to get close to Him, please Him, and serve Him.

All that God *is* has gone into His plan for the universe and the human race. He wants each one of us to accept the eternal life His Son offers, and after that to embrace the life He offers us here. His plan, based on His foreknowledge and enforced by His power, weaves itself into every choice that believers make, and brings to the events we cause by our choices the best possible outcomes *for His purposes*. And if we are operating according to His Word, we will be integrated with His plan and will facilitate its implementation.

Our plans can be part of His plan, if we confess our sins, pray according to His will, study His Word, and believe in Him and His Word. When our plans coincide with His, we will be the recipients of all that the infinite God, Creator of everything, can provide to make us viable and productive participants in His plan. *We cannot see the plan as a whole*, but we can follow God's pathway to maturity and spirituality, and thereby know His will for us each day...in every way. We will know what to do, where to go, who to take with us when we go there, and what to think. We will choose well, because we will be committed to God and to His perfect plan.

No matter who you are, or what you have in terms of personal or material assets, God has you in His plan. If you will begin to choose God now, and choose Him each day by confessing and praying and studying, always believing in Him, you will be in the part of God's plan that holds you and carries you and strengthens you...and you will know that your Father has good things in mind for you. All you have to do is choose Him. Josh. 24:15b throws down the gauntlet: "Choose you this day whom you will serve...."

## Endnotes

1. Some of the conclusions about God's goodness, as seen in the book of Job, were gleaned from a sermon titled "Is God Really Good: Sermon on the Book of Job", 6-29-08, by Marvin Effa, pastor at Bethany Bible Church, Plano, TX. This sermon is available for free at [www.bethanybible.com](http://www.bethanybible.com).
2. *The Interlinear Bible*, ed. and trans. by Jay P. Green, Sr., p. 843. Sovereign Grace Publishers, Lafayette, Indiana, 1985.
3. *The Interlinear Bible*, p. 805.
4. "Paramount Issues in Life", an article by J. Hampton Keathley, III, p. 13. Biblical Studies Press, 2000. This article is available at [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org).
5. "Pleasing the Lord", an article by J. Hampton Keathley, III, p. 2. Biblical Studies Press, 1998. This article is available at [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org).
6. Some of the insights on Gal. 5 were gleaned from sermons presented in 2007-2008, by Marvin Effa, pastor at Bethany Bible Church, Plano, TX. These sermons are available for free at [www.bethanybible.com](http://www.bethanybible.com).
7. "Paramount Issues in Life", by J. Hampton Keathley, III, pp. 5-6.
8. "Resting in God's Sovereignty", an article by J. Hampton Keathley, III, pp. 2-4. Biblical Studies Press, 1997. This article is available at [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William D. Gibbs, III, spent 25 years in public service as an educator and curriculum designer. He served as teacher, principal, superintendent, and curriculum developer in the public school systems of Texas. He has now taken his skills in the area of learning-program development and is channeling them into service for Jesus Christ. Much of his career in education was spent developing programs for at-risk students. His work now is targeted toward at-risk Christians (or new ones). The same way that he built systems for filling in gaps and establishing solid foundations for student learning, he has built on the foundation of the Word to provide clear studies that facilitate Christian living and accelerate the growth and effectiveness of believers.

Gibbs began an intensive study of the Word in 2010, and initiated a practice at that time of recording his findings in writing. He has written ten books since then...and has now condensed them into a survey course: *Bible Basics for Living: Essential Foundations*. This course and the books which form the foundation for it (of which this is one) are the culmination of his experiences in life, his professional career, and—more recently—his studies in the Word.

He has been surprised to discover what the Bible REALLY says about living, and is sure that you will be surprised, as well, when you work through his studies. It must be said that the central player and point in this “work” is not the author, but God. If—and only if—God is in this writing, it will be helpful and beneficial to believers who read it, and God will be glorified by its dissemination.