

**Studies On**

***Getting Closer to God***

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## *Studies on Getting Closer to God*

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## **Introduction**

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're still trying. Knowledge abounds. Wisdom lags.

Regardless of our failure, God still loved us and found it best to send His Son to die on the cross to take the penalty for our wrong-doing and to make us righteous before Him. Because of God's love and the sacrifice of His Son, we who have believed in Him have eternal life. But that's not all. We have lives to live now...in time. The work that Jesus Christ did for us applies as much *after* we first believed as it did at that time. This study is about seeing the things that His work means for us now...in our lives on this earth...as we await our new bodies and a new life face-to-face with Him.

For the time that we have here, we have instructions from God in His Word. The Bible is true and complete, our source for knowing about God. We want to know more. As we learn the Bible, we believe God will unveil Himself to us and show us ways we can move closer to Him. As we get closer, we expect to see that He is more, and we are less. We can only pray that we will be increasingly removed as He is increasingly revealed.

*Studies on Getting Closer to God* is presented as lessons from God on how to approach Him, honor Him, and become more like Him. This writing is offered with a prayer that God will be the sole point, the focus, and the object of our attention and approbation as we examine His Word.

We have so much to learn. I believe this is a start. You will not agree with everything that is said here. God's Word is perfect; our interpretations are not. But—by God's grace—may you find words here that will strengthen your faith in Him, and cause you to see more clearly how great God is.

## Acknowledging God

**Definition of “Acknowledge”.** The word “acknowledge” is often used to indicate a mere assent to an idea. It is sometimes seen as giving casual notice to someone in passing, or heedless recognition of an achievement. But “acknowledge” in the Bible means much more than this. Words that are used interchangeably with “acknowledge” are “recognize” (Ps. 51:3), “realize” (Is. 61:9), “claim” (Daniel 11:39), “admit” (Hos. 5:15), “give proper honor to” (1 Cor. 16:18), and “understand” (2 Cor. 1:13). These words do not convey some passing nod to a person or achievement; these are stronger words that convey something consequential and meaningful.

Webster defines “acknowledge” as the following:

1. To admit as true
2. To recognize the authority or claims of
3. To respond to
4. To express thanks for
5. To state that one understands

Even Webster gives weight to the term “acknowledge”. Now consider the definitions just given, in light of Proverbs 3:5-6, which says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths.” Instead of leaning on your own understanding, acknowledge Him, which, given the definitions above would call for you to do the following:

- For definition 1 above: Admit that God is real and His Word is true.
- For definition 2 above: Humble yourself and submit to His authority and will.
- For definition 3 above: Respond to Him with faith.
- For definition 4 above: Thank Him for everything.
- For definition 5 above: Seek understanding in His Word.

As we will see in future studies, when we recognize that God is God, understand Him by studying His Word, believe what He says, pray to him in Jesus’ name, and thank Him always for all things, we will get directions on what to do and where to go.

**Giving Acknowledgement.** God is not asking much. When He says “I AM that I AM”, He simply wants us to acknowledge this. It feels good even for *people* to be affirmed in a way that says to them, “You are here.” This confirms our existence and gives credence to our viability. With God, it seems He just wants us to see, and say, “You (God) are here”, and even more than that, “YOU ARE that YOU ARE.” This is acknowledging God, and He wants us to do it *all the time*. “You, God, are God.”

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David expressed this in Psalm 86:10, as follows: “You [God] are great and do marvelous deeds; you alone are God.” A study about God must begin with an acknowledgement of Who He is. We will get into this much more in the study on “The Fear of the Lord” and others, but—for now—take time to acknowledge the God of the Universe.

## The Importance of Scripture

**Learning About God.** We know God's ways from the Bible. To acknowledge Him we must know more about Him, and the Scripture is the place where get this knowledge. 2 Tim. 3:16 says the following:

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It straightens us out and teaches us to do what is right. It is God's way of preparing us in every way, fully equipped for every good thing God wants us to do.

So the Bible teaches us what God wants, and gives us the preparation we need to live a life that honors Him. He not only gives us all we need to know; He also sends a private tutor. John 14:26 says "...the Counselor, and I mean the Holy Spirit, will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I myself have told you." So Scripture contains all we need, to do all God requires, and the Holy Spirit *teaches us as we study His Word*.

Scripture is the living voice of God. 2 Pet. 1:18-21 gives the following call to pay attention to the Scripture:

We ourselves heard the voice when we were there with him on the holy mountain. Because of that we have even greater confidence in the message proclaimed by the prophets. Pay close attention to what they wrote, for their words are like a light shining in a dark place until the day of Christ appears. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy in Scripture [in writing] came from the prophets themselves or because they wanted to prophesy. It was the Holy Spirit who moved the prophets to speak from God.

The Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets and later through the apostles in words that are "from God"...words that we should pay close attention to.

**The Source of Knowledge About God.** *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* cites the Greek word from which the word "inspired" is drawn in 2 Tim. 3: 16 above. The word is "*theopneustos*". *Holman* shows how this word is often translated as "God-inspired", which is "God breathing in", but the word actually means "God-spined", or "God breathing out". The Bible is the product of God's breath. *Holman* stated, "Scripture's origin means it is the *very Word of God*. The Bible does not just contain the Word of God; it IS the Word of God, and the God-breathed Word was written *once*, for all time." (Endnote 1)

The following is also from *Holman*, "The Scriptures alone testify of Christ. There is no other way to know Him. Christ is the center of the Christian faith, and the way to Him is by that which the Spirit of God employs for this purpose, the God-breathed Bible." Everything we need to know about finding Jesus, and then living for Him, is found in the Scriptures. (Endnote 2)

God has revealed Himself to us in the Scriptures, but everyone can see evidence of Him in all creation and in His general provision for mankind on earth. He is everywhere in nature for us to see

(Rom. 1:19-20), and even our awareness of ourselves causes us to reflect on His existence, thus revealing God both in our environment and in our collective conscience. The Scriptures, though, are more direct and specific, giving us an understandable and usable revelation of God. As believers, our understanding of God is found in Scripture. It is our witness to the grace of God, and our call to faith. Apostles and prophets recorded God's Word, which beckons us to embrace all that it teaches. For believers, the Scripture is God revealed.

Paul stated (1 Cor. 2:13), "This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words." The Holy Spirit teaches us these words (John 14:26) and, as we shall see later, helps us apply it.

**Passages on the Importance of Scripture.** There are a number of scriptures that discuss the Scripture itself that clarify and emphasize its importance and value. A few of these are cited here:

Hosea 6:3—"Oh that we might know the Lord. Let us press on to know Him." We *pursue* knowledge of Him.

Romans 15:4—"For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of Scriptures we might have hope."

Proverbs 4:20-22—"My son, pay attention to what I say; listen closely to my words. Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart; for they are life to those who find them." God instructs us to pay attention to His words, which are life.

Proverbs, Chapters 1 through 4, are all about "getting wisdom", or the value of learning and absorbing Scripture. Proverbs 4:7 says, "Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have get understanding."

Colossians 1:25 to 2:5—In these passages Paul cites his commission to present to believers "the word of God in its fullness" (Col. 1:25). In Col. 1:28 he said he was "admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ." As we shall see later, learning the concepts of God in the Scripture is the key to maturity. Paul teaches the Colossians Scripture so they will mature, and "get the full riches of complete understanding" (Col. 2:2).

We will be re-emphasizing the importance of scripture as we study other topics from the Bible. The Bible is the basis for all the concepts presented in these studies. Its value and importance to individuals, and to Christianity as a whole, cannot be over-estimated. Most of the rest of these studies will be about the application of Scripture to our lives as we try to fathom the greatness of God, the glory of His Son, the power of the Holy Spirit, and ways to participate in all they offer.



## Confession of Sins

**We Sin, Which Displeases God.** Shock: Christians sin. 1 John 1:8 is clear: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” But our justification and adoption remain unchanged. At salvation, our sins were washed away...all forgiven. But there is life after salvation, life here on earth, where the sin nature and Satan want to drag us back into the mud of sin. And sin we do. This is what John is saying...believers...sin.

Ephesians 4:30 indicates that it is possible to “bring sorrow to God by the way we live.” And if God ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy. So God punishes His children when they do wrong and bring sorrow to Him. Heb. 12:5-8 (NLT) says the following:

Have you entirely forgotten the encouraging words God has spoken to you, His children? He said, ‘My child, don’t ignore it when the Lord disciplines you, and don’t be discouraged when he corrects you. For the Lord disciplines those He loves, and He punishes those He accepts as His children.’ As you endure His divine discipline, remember that God is treating you as His own children. When you are disciplined, cheerfully submit. If God does not discipline you as he does his own children, it means that you are illegitimate and are not really his children after all.

If we are His children, we will be punished for the sins we commit, because God is displeased with sin. Yet, He is our Father, and is still dealing with us in love, as we shall see. This passage goes on to say, “...should we not all the more cheerfully submit to the discipline of our heavenly Father...?”

**The Sinful Nature vs. the Holy Spirit.** When we sin, God is unhappy with us. If God is unhappy, the fellowship we have with God is disrupted. He doesn’t stop loving us, but He is *displeased* with us. We will see in future studies a number of ways in which sin can be overcome, but for the sake of this topic (confession of sins), we want to consider the role of the Holy Spirit in our dealing with sin. Romans 8:13 tells us that it is through the Holy Spirit that we are able to turn from sin and its “evil deeds”. Otherwise, we will be slaves to our sinful nature and not controlled or led by the Spirit. Romans 7:5-6 (NLT) says, “When we were controlled by our old nature, sinful desires were at work within us.” But now, “We are released from the [condemnation and power] of the law.” This is because we “died with Christ” and are “no longer captive to its [the law’s] power.”

The law is the basis for our condemnation, because it exposes our weaknesses (sinfulness). But, in Romans 7:14 (NLT), Paul says, “The law is good. The trouble is not with the law, but with me.” Paul admits his sinful nature is the problem, “I don’t understand myself at all” (v. 15). He admits he can’t stop doing bad things or keep on doing good things, yet it is not he himself that does them, but his sinful nature.

So Paul, a powerful believer, struggled with sin and a sinful nature. We *still have* a sinful nature, even as believers, but it does not have to control us. Paul is telling us that our sinful natures stay within us. In v. 25 (Rom. 7, NLT) he says, “you see how it is: In my mind I really want to obey

God's law, but because of my sinful nature I am a slave to sin." In Romans 8:1 (NLT) Paul tells us that relief can be found with the "life-giving Spirit" of God, Who frees us through the work of Christ Jesus from the power of sin. We can now follow the Spirit, rather than our sinful nature. In v. 12, Paul states that we have no obligation whatsoever to do what the sinful nature urges us to do. No obligation, just tendency.

In the meantime, God's love for us and our eternal relationship with Him remain intact, even when we sin. Romans 8:38-39 (NLT) tells us that "Neither death nor life" can separate us from God's love. Not even angels or demons can. Not fears and worries. Even the powers of hell can't do it. "Nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love God revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord." But, we still sin. We have a sinful nature, and sometimes it is in control inside of us, even though we have eternal life, become God's children, and will never be separated from His Fatherly love.

**The Solution for Sin.** How, then, do we keep the sinful nature in check, and make sure we are controlled by the Spirit, so we can "serve God" (Rom. 7:6, NLT) in a new and right way? What can disengage the sinful nature and reassert the control of the Spirit, thus enabling us to please God and restore our fellowship with God? Keep in mind that Christ paid for all sins. But how do we as Christians call on His sacrifice to cover the sins we keep on committing? Keep in mind that the requirements not to sin are so stringent that every fleeting impulse of greed, or momentary wandering of the eye, can put the sinful nature right back in charge. The result: we sin routinely, if not continually. So, how do we cover these sins, while we are working our way toward a more mature status where we will learn many things to help us avoid and resist sin?

We begin to answer this question in Leviticus 5:5 (NLT). When the people described in Leviticus (Jews) were guilty of violation of the law, things they did unintentionally, or that they did not know they had done, they were told that they must "confess their sin and bring to the Lord as their penalty a female...sheep or goat. This will be a sin offering to remove their sin." This depicts "confession of sins" as the way for believers to have sins forgiven and removed.

This is seen again in Ps. 32:5 (NLT), where David said to the Lord, "I confessed my sins to you and stopped trying to hide them. I said to myself, 'I will confess my rebellion to the Lord.' And you forgave me. All my guilt is gone." In v. 6, he continues, "Therefore, let all the godly [believers] confess their rebellion...that they may not drown in the floodwaters of judgment." Pr. 28:13 echoes this concept, "People who cover over their sins will not prosper. But if they confess and forsake them, they will receive mercy."

Notice in Pr. 28:13 (NLT) that the term "confess and forsake" is used to describe what happens when a believer looks at himself from God's viewpoint and turns from sin to God. By confessing, we name the sin, which is, in effect, adopting God's view of the sin, thus forsaking it. That does not mean we will never commit that sin again; it simply means we admit it for what it is...evil. In that moment, it's easy to feel confident that "I'll certainly not do that again." But we will, and maybe worse. Such is our sorry nature. That's why we need a way to have our sins forgiven. When we confess the sin, that sin is exposed/disclosed to God. It is not as though God did not know about it

already, but because we are *agreeing* with God and seeing the sin as He does...seeing the sin in ourselves...we are sharing God's disdain for the sin and invoking the forgiveness which Christ earned for us. Thus we turn from the sin to God's grace, enjoy His forgiveness, and have our fellowship with Him renewed.

**The Process for Confessing Our Sins.** We need to look more closely at the process for confession. *Vine's Bible Dictionary* cites the Greek word that corresponds with "confess", which is the word, "*homologeō*". This word means to "speak the same thing". (Endnote 3) In other words, to *agree* by *citing* the sin we have committed. We are using the same word to describe our actions or thoughts that God uses. We are stating *His* view point. By agreeing with God about the sin, we are repenting, or changing from the position of the one who committed the sin to the position of the one who judges it. We then judge our own act of sin so God doesn't have to. The judgment of that sin was already made on the cross, and our confession gets the sin removed.

The first chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> John gives us a clear view of the process and purpose of confessing our sins. This chapter is addressed to believers. In 1 John 1:3 (NLT), John says, "Our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." This is the relationship we have with God as believers...before we sin. Verses 5-6 describe our fellowship with God, telling us that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. "We are lying if we (believers) say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness" (v.6). Spiritual darkness is the place where we have or practice sin, a place where we cannot have fellowship with God. And sin disrupts our fellowship with God.

John continues his discussion of fellowship in v. 7, "But if we live in the light of God's presence, just as Christ is, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin." So the place "in the light" is the place where Jesus cleanses us from all sin. The light of God's presence is a place of transparency, where what we do and think is visible to us *and* to God. God is "present" when we are living in the light, heart and soul opened for God to see. What we might expect God to see first when He looks into our transparent hearts is our sin, but what He actually sees *if we are in the light* is His Son's work that removes our sin, thus we are forgiven. It is when we hold on to our sins, treasure them, and hide them, that the all-seeing God is displeased, thus beginning a pattern of discipline and punishment to prompt us to turn around, confess, repent.

In 1 John 1:8 (NLT), John sweeps the whole of Christendom with a giant dragnet, and implicates us all. "If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and are refusing to accept the truth." When we say we have no sin, we are saying to God, "You are not here", as though He didn't really exist. But He is here, watching every move we make, and every thought we think. God will not be ignored or discounted...we must *acknowledge Him* by acknowledging the specific sin we have committed. When we do this, we accept the covering made available to believers by the work of Christ on the cross.

1 John 1:9 (NLT) gives us God's way of applying the work of Christ on the cross to our lives as Christians: "If we confess our sin [name it; agree with God about our sin], then "He is faithful and just to forgive our sins [the ones we know about], and to cleanse us from *all* unrighteousness [even

the ones we don't know about].” So when we agree with God we show our faith, accept Christ's work, and experience COMPLETE forgiveness. Then in v. 10, if we deny our sin, we reject God's view of that sin. “On the other hand, if we say we have not sinned we call God a liar and show that *His Word* has no place in our heart” (italics mine).

Paul said it this way, in 1 Cor. 11:31 (NLT): “If we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged.” When we confess our sins, we *judge* ourselves, and are forgiven for those sins. Otherwise, we will be judged for those sins [as believers] and will receive discipline from God (1 Cor. 11:32). Incidentally, this verse calls for us to judge *ourselves*, not others. Jesus said in Matthew 7:1-2 (NLT), “Judge not, that you will not be judged.” Paul echoed this in Romans 2:1 (NLT), “You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.” Criticism, judging, condemning...these do not fall within the purview of our responsibilities as Christians. God is the judge, and our only obligation in His view is to judge ourselves. The only sins we should be confessing are our own.

**Christ is Our Defense Attorney.** In 1 John 2:1 (NLT), John follows up on his discussion of clearing our sins by confessing them, by saying that he is writing these things to his readers, “so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin [and you will], we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins”, and not just ours alone, but for all the world. “Right now, however,” John is saying (loosely paraphrased), “I am talking about *believers* sinning, so understand what I mean: Jesus is defending us because we sin. He is presenting His work to the Father when we confess, and showing that the sins we name are covered by His work. Case closed.” When we confess, we're covered, and we can live “in the light”.

We should live in the light, then, because the silence and darkness of losing fellowship with God is a miserable place. Fellowship will only return when we confess our sins. Considering the frequency with which we sin, it is easy to see that we should confess as often as we pray, which we are told to do *without ceasing*. When we do confess, we will return to fellowship with God, so that His Spirit—rather than our sinful nature—will be back in control. Once again, we will sense the presence of God, and our joy will be restored. This technique is crucial to our growth toward maturity and to keep us in fellowship with God.

## Fighting Sin

**The Importance of Not Sinning.** Confession of our sins gets us back in fellowship with God, and we walk “in the light”...until the next sin, which is right around the bend. We know what to do after we sin, but how do we deal with sin *before* it happens? How can we get it under control?

The big question about sin is whether we should focus more on obtaining the *power* to stop sinning, or whether it is more important to concentrate on shoring up *determination* and *self-discipline* to change our behavior and thought patterns. Given the presence of our sinful natures and the pull of the devil and the world, which give us this non-stop propensity to sin, we can probably guess that we are not going to be able to stop sinning all by ourselves. Our belief is that God’s power will have to be the enabler to help us slow down this run-away train. Sin is the most divisive and destructive force in our experience. It wrecks everything. This question may be the most important one facing Christians today: How do I fight sin?

**The Power to Beat Sin.** If God’s power *is* the source of our resistance to sin, where is the plug-in and how do we get to it? As always, the answers are found in the Scripture. 2 Peter 1:3 declares that the power of Jesus, His *divine power* gives us *all we need* for Godlike behavior. The secret is seen in the phrase, “through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness” (v. 3). Knowledge of Him...that seems to be the source. Look at 2 Pet. 1:8, where Paul says that faith and knowledge, and the fruits of the Spirit, “will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Knowledge. Knowing about God, His Son, and the Holy Spirit, is the key to opening the pipes through which God’s power can flow into us. He saved us, through His glory and goodness, by His work on the cross, and then He left us with “great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires” (2 Pet. 1:4). Work back through it: corruption is escaped when we participate in God’s divine nature, which we do through the promises that come to us as we get more knowledge of Him. Paul considered this important enough to “...keep on asking that God may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know Him better.”

2 Peter 1:5 adds, “So make every effort to apply the benefits of these promises [God’s Word] to your life. Then your faith will produce a life of *moral excellence*”. Moral cleanliness opens us up to know God better, because of our fellowship with Him. As confession returns us to fellowship with God, increased moral cleanliness keeps us there longer, and moral cleanliness leads to the following:

- Self control, which leads to
- Patient endurance of suffering, which leads to
- Godliness, which leads to
- Love for Christians, which leads to

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- Love for everyone.

These are the results of fellowship with God and the continued growth we experience as the Spirit teaches His Word to us.

Knowing about God tells us how to access God's systems, so that we will receive the power to live godly lives. Learning about God starts a whole series of good things that culminate in our being more like Him. Do you see it? To draw on the power to be more like Him, we need to *know Him*.

We hear the saying, "It's not *what* you know, it's *who* you know" that gives you some advantage, such as you might need in securing a job. But in this case, you get to know "Who" (God) by knowing "What" (God's Word). 2 Peter 1:2 calls for believers to pay attention to Scripture. Peter wants his readers to learn scripture so they can draw on the power to access "everything we need for living a godly life." Knowing God's techniques is the key to a godly life, and *Scripture* is the source. Peter is about to die, and he wants his readers to receive his message from God. In 2 Peter 1, he said the following:

1. I plan to keep on reminding you of these things until I die (v. 1-11).
2. I want you to remember them long after I'm gone. (v. 15)
3. We are not making up clever stories about Jesus. (v. 16)
4. We have great confidence in the message proclaimed by the prophets. (v. 19-20)
5. Pay close attention to what the prophets wrote. (v. 19)
6. Their words are like a light shining in a dark place until Christ appears. (v. 19)
7. Their message did not come from the prophets apart from God. (v. 21)
8. It came from the Holy Spirit. (v. 21)

So pay close attention to Scripture.

*Knowing about God* tells us where the power is found. Paul told the Galatians (3:10), "The Holy Spirit came upon you after you believed the message about Christ...After starting your Christian lives in the Spirit, why are you now trying to become perfect *by your own human effort?*" Paul told them they were able to work miracles because they *believed* the message they heard about Christ. They were learning about Christ and believing what they were learning. This gave them access to power. To get to the power, then, get understanding.

Paul prayed that God would give the Ephesians, "spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you might grow in your knowledge of God" (Eph. 1:15-17). In that same chapter, v. 19, he said, "I pray that you will begin to understand the incredible greatness of His power for us who believe in Him." In Eph. 3:18 and following he added, "May you have the power to *understand*...how deep his love really is. May you experience the love of Christ...Then you will be filled with the fullness of life and power that come from God." In v. 20, he said, "By His mighty power at work within us, he is able to accomplish infinitely more than we ever dare to ask or hope."

This is a major theme in all our studies: It is God's power that gets it done, and that power comes through understanding the Word. "Understanding" is knowledge combined with faith. When we truly "know God", and trust Him, we will be able to overpower sin and perform godly acts every

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day. The choice I must make is to open His Word, and believe it *with all my heart*. By knowing and believing His Word, I will know how to get to God's power, and morality and good behavior will come.

Almost every topic we will discuss in future studies includes ways to reduce the power of sin in our lives. Getting rid of sin is worth the time it takes to learn God's ways for defeating the powerful negative forces of sin within us and all around us. Conclusion: We must *confess our sins* and *stay in God's Word*.

## **Fear of the Lord**

**What is Fear of the Lord?** Fear of the Lord is a term that has been bandied about for centuries, and it still seems, on the surface, a little vague. What is surprising is how much power there is within the process of “fearing the Lord”. It has been defined in many ways, and some of the notions about it see “fear of God” as one of the following: terror, honor, submission, respect, reverence, and awe. This study sees “fear” (as it relates to God) as “recognition”, or “acknowledgement”, with *reverence*. When God says, I AM that I AM and we look up and get a glimpse of Him, all we can say is, “Oh, my goodness, yes, YOU ARE.” When we see the difference between His Almighty Self and our puny, helpless little selves, the awe at His greatness is overwhelming. We can only acknowledge God *as God*. Then we can say to Him, “I see you,” and we give credence, an expression of faith, to His existence as our Supreme Creator and Authority, believing the truth of His ultimate “ultra-reality”.

**Where Fear of the Lord Begins.** The place of the Holy Spirit in our lives, the value of God’s Word in our hearts, the eternal connection we have with God through our faith in Christ: all of these begin with a realization that God is there (here), and that He is God. This is a true epiphany, an “aha” moment, a time of “Eureka!” When we see God, just once, and grasp His greatness, even for a second, we will never be quite the same again.

Without this recognition we would never have accepted Christ, Who died for our sins. We could not learn and believe God’s Word. And the Holy Spirit could not work through us to make us pleasing to an infinite Being. Fear of God is opening our eyes to see God. This fear exists when our salvation takes place, carrying us through the redemptive work of being born again, and it sustains us through time, until our lives here are over. And the more we learn about Him from His Word, the more we will fear Him, meaning we will acknowledge Him and honor Him as God.

**The Work of Fear.** Fear of the Lord increases our faith, resulting in surrender, and it is our drive to get closer to Him. We want to get next to His Power, His love, His eternal being. He loves us, and we feel safe next to Him...so we want to please Him. To do that, we must pay attention to Him, listen to His words, know Him from what He says, and let His strength enable us to do the things that make Him smile. The fear of the Lord is recognizing HOW BIG HE REALLY IS. Ps. 86:10 says, “You alone are God,” and Ps. 86:1 says “You are my God.” This is fear of the Lord.

The fear of the Lord has many applications, such as helping us resist sin. 2 Cor. 7:1 says, “Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.” Reverence for God perfects holiness. Exodus 20:20 repeats this idea, “God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.” Fear of the Lord actually turns the heat down on our sinful nature. Prov. 16:6 says it again, “Through the fear of the Lord a man avoids evil.”

**Finish.** The fear of the Lord is a topic we will revisit later, but here we will end by saying to our Heavenly Father, “You are a great God, and You are *my* God.” Prov. 3:6 admonishes us, “In all your



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ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths.” Acknowledge means to fully realize and recognize the “I AMness” of God. Fear is acknowledgement. Fear is a true relationship with God, perceiving Him through faith. When we confront the real image of the real God, we sense how big He is, how powerful, how infinite.

When we know Him and acknowledge Him, we will fear Him. We will know that He is bigger than we thought...and we are smaller.

## **The Gospel After Salvation**

**What is the Gospel?** The word “gospel” is used throughout the New Testament as “good news”, usually referring to the good news of Christ’s resurrection and the freedom of each person in the world to participate in His kingdom, simply by believing in Him. This *is* good news...that salvation has been made available. But there is also good news for believers, in that God’s divine power is made available to them through the resurrection of Christ. We want to look here at the power of the gospel *after salvation* and see how it can become part of our lives.

1 Cor. 15 deals with the resurrection of Christ, which is a cornerstone for our salvation, our lives, and for all of Christianity. 1 Cor. 15:1 indicates that the believers at Corinth had “received” the good news, and on the good news (on this ground) they stood. Knowing that Christ was raised from the dead and is now living, they were able to be supported by remembering that He is alive. The good news, at salvation and in the life of the believer, is that Christ is alive.

**Acknowledging Jesus.** We derive spiritual benefit from “acknowledging” God, and in the same way we acknowledge God, we are to acknowledge Christ. We say to Him, “You are here. You are alive and you are God. You have risen and now live.” This expression of our belief in a risen Christ is the basis for our being saved to begin with, and is an enabler for accessing the power of Jesus by recognizing that He is alive, and He is *here!* This acknowledgement goes beyond just “believing” that He is here; it actually becomes “seeing” that He is here, through the eyes of faith. Things “not seen” can become “evident” (seen) by faith, as per Heb. 11:1. And when we *see Jesus* through our own faith, that view of Him becomes a source of power to help us avoid sin and stay close to Him.

When that happens, we can begin to be certain of things we can’t see, and we can “fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Cor. 4:18). As believers, it is possible for us to see the image of Christ Himself, and access His power by remembering that He is alive and by learning about Him in the Scripture.

Seeing the image of Christ is an important component in knowing Him. 2 Cor. 4:4 says unbelievers cannot see Jesus. “They cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” But believers can see this light. 2 Cor. 4:6 says, “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” We, as believers, can have God’s light shining *inside of us*, to illuminate our knowledge about the “glory of God in the face of Christ”. The *light* of God shines inside of us to *light* our understanding of the *light* (glory) of God in the face of Christ.

Back in verse 4 of 2 Cor. 4, the good news which unbelievers could not see was the “glory” (light) of Christ, whose image is God Himself. But we can see this light, and through the knowledge that God is making clear to us in this light, we can see the face of Christ within us. This is the glory that exists because He is alive. This is the “God-life”. He is not just alive; He is super-alive. He is beyond alive. He is God-alive...glorious-alive.

When we see the face of Jesus in our hearts, His light shines from our hearts to show the face of Christ to the world. In Matt. 5:16, Jesus said, “Let your light shine before men.” This is the outreach effect of our seeing Christ within us, and acknowledging Him. We can show Him to the world...shining from within us.

**We See the Living Jesus.** Continuing in 2 Cor. 4, verse 7, we see, “We have this treasure in jars of clay.” We have this treasure (good news of “the glory of God in the face of Christ”) in jars of clay (our bodies). And when we see the face of Christ, we draw on His power. Paul says in verse 15 that he is telling us these things for our benefit, “that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.” So we see Jesus inside ourselves, not just so we can be faithful “meditators” or become introspective, but so God’s grace can reach more people...to the *glory of God* (v. 15). When we see Jesus inside our hearts, we will be empowered to bring grace to the people.

This is the gospel: Jesus is alive in us and we *keep on looking* at Him. We, once again (2 Cor. 4:18), “fix our eyes NOT on what is seen [with physical eyes] but on what is unseen,” i.e., the face of Christ within us, which we see by acknowledging that He is alive, and in our hearts. In v. 12 (2 Cor. 4) Paul states, “Life is at work in you.” This is the life of Christ that saves us and sustains us. Our eyes are not on the cross, or the tomb where Christ was laid, but on the *risen* Lord. We can greet each other with this acknowledgement: “He is alive!”

2 Cor. 3:18 confirms our opportunity to let the light of Christ shine from us. “We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory (light) which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” It is His image which we want reflected in us. As we learn more about Christ, and about His Holy Spirit, the life of Christ can progressively become our lives.

**We Recognize Jesus.** Finally, Scripture helps us focus the image of Jesus. When we see Jesus we will recognize Him if we keep looking at Him in the Bible and in our hearts. When two disciples were walking on a road to Emmaus, after Jesus’ resurrection, they encountered Jesus but did not recognize Him. They failed to see that it was Him, because “their eyes were kept from recognizing Him” (Luke 24:16). Later their eyes were opened and they recognized Him. What changed to open their eyes? The thing that enabled them to see was Scripture, taught to them by Jesus Himself. In Luke 24:32 the two disciples tell what happened, “were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” Scripture opens *our* eyes in the same way and helps us recognize Jesus. Knowing and believing Scripture brings Jesus into focus so we can see Him clearly and recognize Him, and by doing this we can avoid sin, stay close to Him, and live by His “power from on high” (Luke 24:49).

Other references to the “light” and “seeing Jesus” from the Scripture can flesh out what we have said about these so far. The first one is found in Ephesians 5:1-14. In verses 8-10 of that chapter, we see, “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.” In v. 14, we see, “Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” A sleeping believer is one not in fellowship, and one who fails to acknowledge the Jesus.

In connection with fellowship, John said in 1 John 1:7, that we should “walk in light”; in other words, we should live in fellowship with Him by confessing our sins to Him. Once we have confessed our sins, we can “acknowledge” Jesus, thus seeing His light within us.

Hebrews 2:8-9 states, “and [God] put everything under His feet. In putting everything under Him, God left nothing that is not subject to Him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to Him. But *we see Jesus*, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor...” (emphasis mine).

**The Power of the Resurrection.** In Phillips 3:10, Paul said, “I want to know Christ and the *power* of His resurrection.” There are other references to this power, as follows:

- Ephesians 1:19-20 offers this, “What is the immeasurable greatness of His power in us who believe, according to the working of His great might which he accomplished when He raised Him from the dead.” Paul is praying this for the Ephesians: that they would know the power of God in the resurrection which is now at work “in us”.
- Romans 6:8-14 tells us that, since Christ died and rose from the dead, he has conquered death and sin. Since He conquered sin, it is no longer our master. The power of the resurrection is once again at work.
- The resurrection power of Jesus was seen in Acts 1:8, when Jesus promised his disciples, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.” This was spoken to the disciples after His resurrection.
- 1 Cor. 1:18 tells of the power of the gospel in our lives, saying, “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the *power* of God” (italics mine). This is the power of the resurrected Christ.

So, the “good news” is for believers, as well as unbelievers. Unbelievers can be saved because of the power of the resurrection, while believers can live in the light of the resurrection, and serve as witnesses to the life of Christ for all the world to see. *Seeing Jesus* morphs us into Him; by focusing on Him, we become more like Him.

We must make this clear. We use “Jesus Christ” almost interchangeably with “Holy Spirit”, which is sometimes called the “Spirit of Christ”. There is no competition among the members of the Godhead...they are ONE PERSON! As we shift back and forth in an emphasis on Jesus Christ at one point, and the Holy Spirit at another, or perhaps refer to God the Father, we must see these as congruent and continuing Forces that have no objection to cross-referencing. We will try to distinguish roles of each as we go through our studies, but we feel a sense of freedom in ascribing the indwelling qualities of one of them within us, and within our lives...to all of them. The Father plans, the Son executes the plan, and the Spirit honors the Son. But for us, it is all God within us and around us.

## **The Holy Spirit vs. The Sinful Nature**

**The Conflict Between the Sinful Nature and the Holy Spirit.** We receive the Holy Spirit at salvation (Gal. 3:2; 4:6). This begins a relationship that continues until we die or until Jesus comes again. But the sin nature stays with us and a contest goes on inside of us between our nature and the Spirit of God. Gal. 5:17 says, “For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.” But verse 16 in this chapter has already instructed us in this way, “So I say, live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” Verse 18 refers to this as being “led by the Spirit”. If the Spirit of God is in charge, His fruits will be seen (Gal. 5:22-23): “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, goodness, and self-control”. If the sinful nature controls, the results are quite different: “sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, factions, and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like” (Gal. 5:19-21).

**Sin Removes Fellowship with God: How to Get It Back and How to Keep It.** If we are in fellowship with God, we will be controlled by the Spirit and He will be pleased with us. Sin disrupts that fellowship and turns our minds over to the sinful nature, which produces more sin. 1 Jn. 1 says, in verse 8, that all of us believers sin, and if we say we have no sin (nature) we are liars. So we all sin at some point (many points), break the fellowship, and disrupt the control of the Spirit. 1 Jn. 1:9 gives us a means for immediate recovery and repair by confessing our sins. At that moment our fellowship with God is restored and the Holy Spirit once again takes the wheel.

The degree to which we stay there, close to God, pleasing Him, loving Christian brothers and other people, and allowing the Holy Spirit to produce His fruit in us, depends on our BEING CLEAN, either by not sinning or by confessing . We remember our former study on the fear of the Lord which enables us to be close to God and tap into His power to help us avoid sin. Fear of the Lord recognizes God’s existence and credits Him with being the great and ultimate “I AM”...the “Existing One” (literal meaning of Jehovah). We see Him; we know He is there. Here’s what this does to sin: We cannot hold a focus on God, Who is *right there* (here), view an overpowering image of His immediacy and infinity, and still choose to sin. The fear of the Lord, our image of the true God, crowds out sin. It is when that image fades, as did the glory of God in the tabernacle, that the sinful nature causes us to drift, thus disengaging the Holy Spirit...and off we go down the road of sin.

So, we see two steps at this point. First of all, because of the cross, confession kills the sins of the confessing believer. After that the fear of the Lord, a form of enhanced faith, as we will see, works to keep us close to God, which provides a repellent to sin. There are *many* other concepts and processes involved in the removal of sinful practices, and we will see these in future studies. For now, our focus is on distinguishing life under the control of the Holy Spirit vs. life under the domination of the sinful nature.

**The Benefits of Being Controlled by the Holy Spirit.** When we are out of fellowship, the Holy Spirit is grieved (Eph. 4:30), and we are left in the dark (Eph. 5:8-11). But when we are controlled by the Holy Spirit, the benefits are numerous. Here are some of them:

- The Holy Spirit teaches us. (Jn. 14:25-26)
- He teaches us about the deeper things of God. (1 Cor. 2:10-11)
- The Spirit gives us competence. (2 Cor. 3:4-6)
- The Spirit provides and activates gifts that enable believers to help each other. (1 Cor. 12:, esp. v. 7-11)
- The Holy Spirit produces fruit through us. (Gal. 5:22-23)
- He works miracles among us. (Gal. 5:3)
- He even prays in our place because we do not know what to pray for. (Rom. 8:26-27)

**Control is Crucial.** When the Holy Spirit is doing these things through us, all things are working together for good because we “love God”. (Loving God is another thing we do through the Holy Spirit, as we shall see in more detail in a later study). But when we sin, the power supply stops, we are in “black-out”, and nothing really worthwhile can come from us. We will be disciplined by God in the world, and there will be no effectiveness or production in our spiritual lives.

When the sinful nature is in charge, we will have our “minds set on what that nature desires”, but if the Holy Spirit is controlling us, “We will have our minds set on what the Spirit desires” (Rom. 8:5). Continuing in Romans 8, verse 6 says, “the mind of sinful man is death...” This is even more serious than darkness; this means we are spiritually dead, producing nothing, showing no sign of spiritual life. When the sinful nature takes over, we are spiritually lifeless. This cannot stand. Verse 8 says, “Those controlled by the sinful nature *cannot please God.*” That means that everything we do does not get God’s approval, and we are groping around in the black of night.

On the other hand, returning to Rom. 8:6, “the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace.” We can “keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25) whenever we live under His control, or “in Him”. We “live as children of light” and “find out what pleases the Lord” (Eph. 5:8-10). We will “understand what the Lord’s will is” by being filled (controlled) by the Spirit (Eph. 5:17-18).

We can’t have it both ways. What will it be? The sinful nature or the Holy Spirit? We choose the Holy Spirit by confessing our sins and by acknowledging His presence and power in and near us, If we are conscious of God, He will strengthen us. The Holy Spirit can live through us to portray the life of Christ.

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In Ps. 139:7-8, David said the Holy Spirit is everywhere. Wherever David went or even “could” go, the Holy Spirit was there. Always, in all places, David said, “You are there.” By our saying to Him now, “You are there (here)”, we stay in His power and He can work in us.

Here’s where we are. When we are in fellowship with God and controlled by the Spirit, and we acknowledge Him to stay close to Him, the Holy Spirit will help us. When we get close to Him, the “Helper” we have been given will be in charge, and the sinful nature won’t stand a chance.

## Resisting Satan

**Satan Undermines Godliness.** Satan is the “accuser”, among other things. He accuses believers in front of God. In Job 1 and 2, God hears Satan’s accusations against Job and allows Satan to test Job for seemingly no cause related directly to Job. God said of Job that he “fears God and shuns evil” (Job 1:8). Satan claims Job honors God because he has it so good, and if he lost all his stuff, and later his loved ones, he would not stay loyal to God. God permitted Job to be tested to address this accusation. We’ll see this story and its implications completely in a future series. Here, we see Satan as the “accuser”.

In Zechariah 3:1, Satan is at it again, standing at the right hand of a high priest, who is standing before the angel of the Lord. Satan was there to accuse the high priest. We see in v. 3 that this high priest had dirty clothes on (symbolic of sin in his life), yet he did not hide them. He was standing—continuing to stand—before the angel of the Lord. By standing there and allowing God to see his dirty clothes, the high priest was, in essence, confessing his sins. In verse 2 God rebukes Satan, who is standing there beside the high priest, and says, “Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?” We understand what this means from verse 3, where the angel of the Lord commands, “Take off His filthy clothes,” and then in verse 4 the angel of the Lord says to the high priest, “See, I have taken away your sin.” He was “snatched from the fire” when his sins were taken away (filthy clothes removed), and not only that, but the angel of the Lord added, “I will put rich garments on you.” In v. 6, the angel of the Lord promised the high priest that, if he would “walk in my ways and keep my requirements,” he would “govern my house...and I will give you a place....” Once sins have been forgiven, and for as long as the forgiven sinner remains close to God, Satan’s accusations are for nothing.

**Resisting Temptation.** Satan is also called the “tempter”, as in Matt. 4, where he tempted Christ in the wilderness. This quality is seen again in 1 Thess. 3:3-10. In this passage Paul is concerned that news of his many “persecutions” may have shaken the faith of the Thessalonians, but he is happy to have learned that their faith was still strong. He thought their faith might have been weakened, making them vulnerable to the temptations of the “tempter” (see Matt. 4:3), with the result that all of Paul’s efforts with them might have been useless. Faith is a deterrent to Satan’s schemes to tempt believers to sin, so Paul wanted to “supply what was lacking” in their faith to further fortify them against Satan. The point seems clear: strengthen faith, and resistance to temptation will also be strengthened.

The point of resisting temptation is to avoid sinful behavior, because sin will be punished: “The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you” (1 Thess. 4:6b). Verse 7 in this passage states, “God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life,” so that we can “live in order to please God” (v. 1), and keep on doing this “more and more”. Satan wants to disrupt our “holy lives” and pull us away from God. If he can entice us to sin, he will be effective in disconnecting us from God’s power and disabling us as instruments of God.



Satan is not gentle about this, either. 1 Peter 5:8 says, “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” So believers are told to “resist him, standing firm in the faith...” Part of maintaining this faith to keep it sufficient to resist the devil is to “humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand” (1 Peter 5:6). When we humble ourselves before God, He will be able to lift us up. In this humble state, His mighty hand sustains us, as we “cast all our cares on Him, because He cares for you” (v. 7).

**The Role of Humility.** Humility is a key component in resisting sin, but it can be tricky. Humility is not just self-effacement...it is everything we’ve been talking about. In verse 5 (still in 1 Peter 5), we see the requirement, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” The proud are those who think they do no wrong, so they never confess and they stay perpetually out of fellowship with God. And for those who do humble themselves, admit their errors, confess their sins, they move under the mighty hand of protection against Satan. They see the face of Jesus within themselves and are reminded how grand and great and really BIG and powerful God is. When we stand in front of an infinite God we can only feel humble. This is the fear of the Lord: when we bow before His grace and cry, “Abba, Father”.

Ironically, when we bow the lowest before God, we can stand the tallest in our faith. 1 Pet. 5:9 describes it this way: “...the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast” (v. 10). When we have confessed and acknowledged Him, we will then be ready to resist Satan because that is when God makes us “strong, firm, and steadfast”. Incidentally, don’t try this at home (without God)...Satan will devour you.

This theme continues in James 4:6-8, where we are told once again to be humble in order to receive more grace. Verse 7-8 says, “Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you.” Coming near to God is the result of confession and acknowledgement. We are recognizing God *as God*...and we are confessing. Verses 8-10 make it clear, “Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double minded” (v. 8). Exposing our garbage to God is not a fun time. “Grieve, mourn, and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom” (v. 9). We are humbled (v. 10), not gleeful and proud, when we confess. But if we resist God and harbor our sins, or fail to worship God (acknowledge Him), Satan is ready to lead us down a garden path of sin, and we will follow helplessly. When we draw near to God, however, He will always be there to welcome us back. We will be able to say, as Christ did, “Get behind me, Satan. You are an offense to me” (Matt. 16:23). God’s grace can empower us to fight Satan.

**The Value of God’s Armor in Resisting Satan.** Ephesians 6:10-11 gives us more on how to resist Satan:

Be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places. Therefore, put on the full armor of

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God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

The armor of God, the whole thing, equips us to stand against evil forces. This is the armor:

1. Belt of truth: Knowledge of God's Word (defensive protection).
2. Breastplate of righteousness: Confess all known sins so the Holy Spirit will control.
3. Gospel of peace: This is the good news that we can be reconciled to fellowship through confession.
4. Shield of faith: Faith extinguishes the arrows of the evil one.
5. Helmet of salvation: Our confidence lies in our current deliverance and ultimate salvation.
6. Sword of the Spirit: Applying God's Word (offensive weapon).
7. Prayer in the Spirit: Pray in fellowship...without ceasing.

These are the things that will protect us from Satan. We must begin to understand that we can't do it. Like most things in the Christian life, only God can do it, and our attempts to do it alone will only lead to failure and discouragement, and put us right where Satan wants us.

## Prayer

**What is Prayer?** Prayer is communication with God. It may be a dialogue, as in Acts 22:18, where God had a two-way conversation with Paul while Paul was praying in the temple. Or prayer may be a monologue, with us talking to a lovingly attentive Father. The monologue format is more likely for us, since we are not Paul.

At the time we were saved, prayer was the way we acknowledged Jesus as our Savior. We use prayer for many things now, as believers. For example, we use prayer to confess our sins. In prayer we acknowledge God, expressing our reverence for Him. Prayer is the method for unloading our burdens, the way we ask for spiritual strength and wisdom, and a means for expressing love for family, friends, and even our enemies. We also seek God's provision through prayer. We give thanks to Him through prayer. Sometimes, we agonize and cry in prayer. And we ask questions of God in prayer, as we seek truth from His Word. Prayer is our link to God.

**How Should We Pray?** In Matt. 6:5-14, Jesus taught His disciples how to pray, and gave them the example of the Lord's Prayer. He spoke against long, showy prayers, and advised the disciples to find a quiet, private place to pray, so they could pray long and hard, as Jesus did when He prayed all night (Luke 6:12). An important thing that Jesus emphasized in regard to prayer is forgiveness of others. Before we pray we should take time to consciously forgive those who have wronged us. Jesus was explicit: If we do not forgive others, our own sins will not be forgiven. This is because unforgiveness is a sin, and sin blocks our lines of communication with God. So we must forgive others in order for our prayers to be heard. Jesus set the standard in Matt. 18:35, telling us to forgive "your brother from the heart". This cannot be overlooked when we pray.

*Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* offers insights on prayer. *Holman* points out that Jesus taught us to pray in His name, which means that we pray seeking His will and showing submission to His authority, and Jesus told us to pray *believing*. Mark 11:24 quotes Jesus, "Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." James applied this to prayer, requesting greater wisdom. In James 1:5-7, he stated, "If you lack wisdom, ask for it and you will get it. But ask believing and not doubting." (Endnote 4)

**What Should We Pray For?** There are many things for us to think about when we pray. James 4:3 tells us that we don't always get what we ask for, because we ask with the wrong motives, so we can spend what we get for our own pleasures. But we must not refrain from asking (James 4:2), because we may be missing something good, simply because we don't ask for it. Later in this study we will see a way to make sure our prayers really count.

Prayer is usually a time of sweet communion with God, but it may be a time when honest frustration is expressed. Jeremiah's frustration in Jer. 20:7-18 is surprising. He proclaims, "Cursed be the day I was born!" and "Cursed be the man who brought my father the news...may that man be like the towns the Lord overthrew without pity." Shameless ranting? Yes. But this shows that

prayer can be a time of *real honesty* before God, when He allows us to “Cast your care upon Him, for He cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7).

The content of our prayers can be elusive, but Psalm 86 offers an excellent example of prayer. It asks for God’s ear, expresses trust, begs mercy, appeals to God for joy, implies confession, acknowledges God’s forgiveness, asks for instruction and focus, offers praise to a loving God, petitions God for strength, and ends saying, “You, O Lord, have helped me and comforted me.” This is a good prayer. If you are blocked in your praying, prayerfully read Ps. 86 and it will help you.

**When Should We Pray?** The time component of our praying also seems important. Prayer is not something we do only in a set-aside time or when we are gathered with a group of believers. Paul told the Romans (Romans 12:12) to be “faithful in prayer”, or to be *consistent* in praying. In 1 Thess. 5:17, he told the Thessalonians to *pray continually*. We have to operate in the world, so we can’t go around with our heads bowed and our eyes closed all the time. We can only think our thoughts and integrate our prayers as we go along. But every thought is an opportunity to pray. Every time we think a thought, we can bounce it off a prayer. The frequency with which we pray affects our closeness to God. Prayer keeps us close, enabling us to acknowledge His mighty Self as we pick our way through the rigorous routines of life. The world is on one side; God is on the other. Our eyes are on the road ahead, but our hearts are focused on God. Life is tugging at us all around, but God’s love is calling to us from above. Prayer brings it all together, the pressures and the providence, making the demand for prayer non-stop.

Ephesians 6:18 continues in this vein, telling us to pray “in the Spirit on all occasions”... This is calling for us to pray without stopping, “with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert...” As we pray on “all occasions”, we are to *be alert*. Be sparked up. Be conscious. When we pray, our consciousness is directed toward God...His reality, His presence. In prayer you can acknowledge Him as God, and as *your* God. This will keep you close to Him and Him close to you. James 4:8 says “Come near to God and He will come near to you.”

But—back to life—when stuff is really happening fast and the heat of battle rages three-sixty, it’s easy to get overwhelmed. This is when prayer is more important than ever. This is where being alert, *conscious of God*, is most important. Just remember to pray. Philippians 4:6 offers respite, “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” (emphasis mine). Instead of being anxious, PRAY. God will exchange His peace for your fretting. If we can do this in *everything*, pray without ceasing, we can finally relax, because God will be protecting our hearts and minds.

So, we are set now, right? We are ready to pray. We know to keep it short in public, pray in Jesus’ name, pray believing, keep on asking, cast our care, follow the prayer in Ps. 86, pray continually, and exchange our anxiety for God’s peace. So we are on the right track. But guess what? We still don’t know *what* to pray. We actually need help in praying, and that is where the Holy Spirit comes in.

**The Holy Spirit Prays For Us.** Romans 8:26-27 tells us that the Holy Spirit helps us pray, because we do not know *what* to pray. So He “intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express”. Please observe this: It is okay that our prayers feel weak, because the Holy Spirit is translating our puny little prayer efforts into powerful pleas before the Father (v. 26).

Verse 27 (still in Romans 8) states that the Spirit intercedes for us “in accordance with God’s will”. 1 John 5:14 tells us that believers who ask anything “according to God’s will” are going to be heard. This same passage tells us that, if we know He hears us, we know we are going to get what we ask for. Why? Because we ask *according to God’s will*. So it’s a really good thing that the Holy Spirit is interceding according to God’s will. He is able to do this, because He *knows* the will of God. 1 Cor. 2:11 says *only* the Holy Spirit knows the thoughts of God. And only He can actually pray “by the book” of God’s will. When the Holy Spirit prays, it’s all good.

Staying with Romans 8:27, we see the phrase, “who searches our hearts”. This is inserted to indicate that God the Father searches our hearts. God knows the mind of the Holy Spirit, as the Holy Spirit knows the thoughts of God, so the Spirit is going to pray in line with God’s thoughts. But why is God searching our hearts? What is He looking for there? In Matt. 15:16-19, Jesus stated that evil things come out of the heart. Jeremiah 17:9 informs us that “the heart is deceitful above all things”. So, in Jer. 17:10, the Lord lets us know that, “I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct...” In Prov. 21:2, Solomon says, “All a man’s ways seem right to him, but the Lord weighs the heart.” God is searching for *evil*, and He’s looking for it in the best hiding place in the world...our hearts. If sin exists in our hearts, the Spirit, who knows the thoughts of God and what God’s will is, will be short-circuited and our prayers will go NOWHERE. This dilemma must be resolved.

**Confession of Sins in Connection with Prayer.** If we are praying “in the flesh”, controlled by the sinful nature, God will be in a state of displeasure with us, and we will not be heard...there’s no way we can be praying “according to His will”. 1 Jn. 1:9 provides the solution: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” This is one thing we **MUST DO BEFORE EVERY PRAYER**, so that we will be in fellowship with God. Then the Holy Spirit will be released to pray **FOR** us, and our prayer will be offered “according to God’s will.” We don’t even have to *know* God’s will to pray according to that will. The Holy Spirit knows it and He will translate our prayer into one prayed properly. But only if we are in fellowship with God.

Confession, then, is crucial to effectiveness in prayer, and worth emphasizing here. Isaiah understood the need for confession, as we see in the sixth chapter of Isaiah, verse 3 and following. This passage presents a scene in which angels were declaring the Word of God in praise (Isaiah 6:2-3). Their voices shook the temple, where Isaiah was standing, and God’s presence was felt, “and the temple was filled with smoke”, a sign that His “glory” was present (v. 4). In the presence of God, Isaiah cries out a confession of his sin, “Woe to me!...I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips...” (v. 5). Isaiah had some “lip sins” still outstanding on his account, but after he confessed these, one of the angels touched his lips with a live coal and said, “See, this has touched your lips;

your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for” (v. 6). Notice that his guilt (for the sin he had committed) was atoned for, but still more was offered when the angel added that all his sins (the sins he had forgotten or did not know about) had been taken care of. By confessing what sins he could think of, he was forgiven for all of them.

Notice what happened then. Isaiah was scrubbed and cleaned and the lines were open between him and God, so Isaiah was tuned in to God’s frequency and able to hear God’s invitation to Isaiah to take on a divine mission. Isaiah responded with willingness, and God sent him to the people with a clear message. Isaiah followed his orders and went to the people. God’s message was delivered.

For us, the lines open when we confess our sins to God before we pray. And if we are to pray continually, how often does this mean we should confess? The answer is clear: continually. It will be rare that we will not find sin in ourselves, especially in our hearts, where evil springs eternal (well, its days are actually numbered, but you see what I mean). When we confess what we can find, those sins we don’t find or see will also be forgiven, and we will come before God with clean hands. We can pray “in the spirit” and “according to God’s will”. And we can call out to God, who made us and loves us, in familiar and privileged intimacy: “Abba, Father”.

**A Model Prayer.** A model prayer would probably line up something like this:

- Confess, or name, known sins to God.
- Acknowledge God...as God.
- Take time to forgive anyone who has wronged you (must be heart-felt).
- Pray for people other than yourself or conditions outside your own.
- Ask for what you want or hope for.
- Thank God for everything.

Pray in Jesus’ Name and by His authority.

## The World

**Living in a Dangerous World.** The world is where we live. It's not ours. We own no part of it. Still, it is our home for now, even though it is not a safe place to be. The world is out to get us. This is not paranoid ranting...the world really is trying to capture us. The world is Satan's playground, and while he is enjoying himself (only for the time being), we are trying to get serious about making our lives mean something here. God created the world, but Satan, with man's cooperation, messed it up. It's a mess, but we are here for awhile, so we have to be ready to deal with these conditions while we're here.

We want to see what Scripture says about the world and our place in it as believers. Getting around in this strange place is tricky and precarious. We must keep the lines open with headquarters, and follow our orders to the letter. We can't afford to be cut off. The enemy is lurking everywhere.

**Pride: Our Connection with the World.** James 4:4 says, "Friendship with the world is hatred toward God...anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God." So—to be tied in with the world, complicit with it, enamored by it, casts us as "haters" of God and causes us to become His "enemies". These are serious things to think about. It is clear we don't want to be captives of the world; who, after all, wants to be an enemy of God?

In this same passage, James tells us God gives us *more grace* when we are close to Him, but God opposes the proud. The way to get "more grace" is to submit to God (v. 7). By submitting to God, we choose not to be a friend of the world and can resist the devil (seen also in v. 7). And we get? More grace.

God opposes the proud (v. 6). To be humble is to see our true helpless, puny selves in the presence of an almighty God. When we say to Him, "You alone are God" (Ps. 86:10), and "You are my God" (Ps. 86:2), we get the picture of ourselves as tiny and weak, and God as huge and super-powerful...infinitely powerful (Ps. 86:10). When this becomes clear to us, we submit to God. And when we submit, He brings us "more grace" (James 4:6), and He will lift us up (v. 10).

Grace, God's power, is our source for dealing with the world. Our resistance to the world, or distancing ourselves from the world, does not begin with some determination of our own *unsteady wills* to deplore the world and keep it at arm's length. It begins with *humility* before God. But the world is loaded with pride (the almighty self), which gets us into trouble and keeps us there.

Here's pride: We try hard—really hard—to see ourselves as the heroes of our own stories, so much so that we just can't seem to stop looking for ways to look good to other people, and we are always scheming to increase our power and influence. We clamor for recognition and approbation, search for the best light in which to display the insignia of our rank, exaggerate our achievements, boast about our skills and strengths, parade our possessions, and put others down to lift ourselves up. We rise in the morning to spread our peacock feathers for all the world to see. Pride, ego,

arrogance. These are the things that seem so irresistible inside of us, yet these are the very things that plant our roots firmly in the systems of the world, and cast us as “haters of God”.

Subtle, isn't it...just trying to get a little respect, don't you see? What harm could there be in that? For starters, Prov. 16:18 warns that “pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall”. Pride's a bad thing...a very bad thing.

It should be noted that pride is not the only sin “in the world”. This seems obvious. But it is our *primary link with the world*, and the tendency in us which makes the world most irresistible. Deut. 8:10-20 says the following:

When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which he has given you. Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments [His Word]...lest when you have eaten, are full, and have built beautiful houses and dwell in them...and your heart is lifted up...then you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.’...If you by any means forget the Lord your God...I testify against you this day that you shall surely perish.

**Eyes on Ourselves; Eyes on the World.** It's so easy to see the world with our eyes and forget to see God within us. That is when we think we are something, when we are really nothing. And that is when God has to take us down a notch or two. Proverbs 16:4-5 echoes this, “Everyone proud in his heart is an abomination to the Lord.” Paul said, “no flesh shall glory in His presence” (1 Cor. 1:30).

Pride is the world's “hook”. Pride is our Achilles' heel, and until pride is broken and saddled, we will be vulnerable to the lure of the world to make us believe we are special. When we believe this, we belong to the world.

Love for the world is a powerful draw. 1 Jn. 2:15-16 says the following:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world, the cravings of sinful man, the lust of this eyes, and the boasting what he has and does, comes not from the Father, but from the world.

There it is again: pride. So, even though we crave things that lead away from God and long to fulfill the yearnings of the flesh (the sinful nature), the worst thing we can possibly do is to *boast* about what we've acquired and what we've done. A lot of “Little Jack Horner's” we are, sitting around and beaming, “O, what a good boy am I.” With this perspective there is no way we're going to humble ourselves, confess our sins, and submit to God. The big problem is this: “God opposes the proud” (James 4:6), and who in his right mind would want God as an opponent? No, we've got to shake the pride to push the world away. And once again, we can't control our pride by simple self-determination...so how, exactly, DO we control it?



First of all, Jesus said, in John 16:33, that we should “take heart”, because He has “overcome the world”. So when we get next to Him, we get the protection of the One who has already beaten the world. Away from Him we are in the darkness (John 3:19) and are pretty much on our own. We can operate only as the world operates...by pride. So, somehow, we’ve got to get on the side that “overcomes the world”. That’s the side that wins. 1 Jn. 2:17 says, “...the world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.” This is victory. So we no longer want to be a part of the ways of the world. But the question still remains as to how we can control pride and step back from the world. As long as we are proud, the world is winning.

**The Mind Makeover.** In Romans 12:3, Paul charges believers, “By the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought....” Remember, pride keeps us connected with the world, so in verse 2 Paul admonishes us, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world”; in other words, don’t let yourself be shaped by pride, “but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” So we need to be transformed by getting our minds renewed. “Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is...His good, pleasing and perfect will.” When our minds get renewed, we will be changed altogether and God’s perfect will for us can become clear.

We seem to be getting closer. If we can get transformed by the mind makeover, we can defeat pride, and then we can submit to God and beat the world. Not conforming to the world... getting a mind makeover...defeating pride...beating the world. So simple. All we have to do is be transformed....oh-oh....how do we do that?

Well, the renewing of the mind that brings about the transformation we need is a process of replacing incorrect concepts—wrong impressions and thoughts—with right ones. It is about getting correct information, or the TRUTH. And where is truth? You got it...in the Bible. There is a lot of information there, so the process of renewing the mind is not a quick one like salvation or forgiveness at confession. It is a long, slow process that will only be accelerated by spending more time studying the Word. This is not out of reach. The Word is everywhere: in print as the Bible (many versions), in innumerable textbooks and reference books on the Bible, on television, at Bible colleges, in CD’s/DVD’s, at churches, on the Internet, and even on billboards. The resources are there, but they must be accessed. This is where choice, self-discipline, and commitment seem to be the most in play. You must spend time learning God’s Word.

Peter was committed to making sure believers had the Word of God. Hailing back to our study on “Fighting Sin”, we saw in 2 Peter 1:12, and following, that Peter would “always remind you [believers] of these things [things of the Scripture], even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have.” In verse 13, he continued, “I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body...and I will make every effort to see that after my departure, you will always be able to remember these things.” And why was it so important to Peter that believers kept on learning and reviewing? The answer is in 2 Pet. 1:3:

“...his divine power has given us everything we need in life and godliness through *knowledge of Him* who called us by His glory and goodness. Through them He has given us His very

great *promises* [His Word], so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”

So, it is clear. Study the Word. It is our training manual for warfare in the world. Be renewed. Get transformed. Defeat pride. Share in Christ’s victory over the world by participating (living) in His divine nature. Then we will no longer be warped by the pattern of this world, and our pride will no longer be able to convince us that we are greater than God, and that we can do without Him. In the mix, we must remember that pride is a sin, and—as such—should be confessed, so that we can stay in fellowship and have the power that comes from the Holy Spirit. Control of the Spirit is important in so many areas of our lives, among them His role as our teacher. For us to understand the Word, He must teach us. And then, for us to recall and apply it, He must lead us.

The more you learn about God, the better you will know Him. The better you know Him, the more you will revere Him. The more you revere Him, the more humble you will become. And the more humble you are, the more pride...will subside. And the world can take a hike.

## Love

**Love Ain't Easy.** Love is the final exam for the believer, the ultimate sign of spiritual maturity, the pinnacle of our achievement as Christians. Love is the best thing we can do, and seems to be the hardest. The reason it's hard? Because of our natures, first of all, but also because of what we see when we look across the sea of humanity: namely, a massive collection of sinful natures, selfish creatures, and anxious people trampling each other as they frantically try to get their needs met. This puts all of us at odds with each other... "us" against "them"... "me" against "you" (More truth than fiction in this wretched view of humanity).

We all have one goal: we are trying to *take care of ourselves*. Everything about the requirements of love cuts across the grain of our own powerful survival instincts, those self-preservation impulses that drive us, and it just so happens that those instincts give rise to the behaviors of our sinful natures, and prevent our caring for others. And the more we look at a world trending toward lawlessness, the more we tend to have chilly feelings toward our neighbors.

In Matt. 24:12, Jesus said an "increase in wickedness" would cause the "love of most" to grow cold. So, the more of us there are, and the more we clamor for limited resources, the more likely we are to think of ourselves first, and the less likely it will be that we will love unselfishly.

Add to these things our own psychological conditions, and the situation worsens. Our personal psychologies tend to make our "inner needs" dominate our motivations, so we can see why showing love would not be high on our list of things to do. Most of us come from some kind of "dysfunctional" background, where, in one way or the other, bad things happened to us. These events may leave us feeling unloved, emotionally deficient, and desperate for positive attention. Most of us suffered pain as children; all of us are needy in some way. So we search for ways to "fill the holes in our souls". This keeps our focus on ourselves, and makes it less likely that we will achieve any kind of loving spirit toward people. We tend to end up noticing only what *we* need; others have to get in line.

It is, then, "unnatural" to love...to give up what we have, to turn the other cheek, to repay evil with good, to go hungry so others can eat, and so on. In Philippians 2:21, Paul said, "Everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ." The pressures on us are enormous, forming prodigious resistance toward compassionate attitudes and loving behavior. We might just want to throw up our hands and say, "It's just impossible!" Or we might be determined to make it happen, saying, "There is no excuse! We are supposed to love, and we just have to do it!" But how?

Here's the reality: It is **not** impossible to love, but YOU *still can't do it*. It is "humanly" impossible to love the way God commands us to love. This is the paradox we face and the dilemma we deal with, and it is the problem we must solve. That is what we hope to accomplish in this study.

**Love Fulfills the Law.** We're supposed to love. Paul described the importance of love in Romans 13:9-10, as follows:

The commandments, 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not covet,' and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

Love sums it up; it fulfills the law. And if love fulfills the law, while sin violates the law, love and sin are diametrical opposites. If sin exists within you, love can't. If love exists within you, sin can't. Ah...but here's the rub...learning how to love. If we can satisfy the love requirement, the rest will be easy, but acknowledging the importance of love is one thing; getting it right is another, as centuries of history tell us. Love is what we want to do, but will we? Can love happen?

**Increasing Love.** Love is a biggie, the biggest test for godliness. It's the ultimate gift, the highest achievement, the greatest good, the richest fruit, and the opposite of sin. Love is better than faith and hope. Love is God Himself...His truest likeness...His finest expression. Love is our noblest goal, and worthy of the exploration of any and all ways for getting it. Still, asking us to love seems too big an order. Still, it must be within reach, because God has commanded us to do it. We must find a way to make it happen.

Let's start with the place where love resides. For each of us personally, love can only come "from the inside", which is where, incidentally, the Holy Spirit and the sinful nature reside. The real show goes on *inside*...and all the world's a stage. Inside is where the battle is waged, and where we need to rally all the spiritual resources in our arsenal so that we can stay on our feet. Inside is where we confess our sins, acknowledge God, see the face of Christ, pray...and, ultimately, love. But it is also where sin begins, and each new moment brings a new battle...and they just keep coming: evil spiritual forces, principalities and powers, the sin nature, the devil, and the lure of the world. But if we are close to God, we can say with David, "The battle is the Lord's" (1 Sam. 17:47).

Love is a matter of the heart, a condition of the soul, a state of the mind, and we are asked to direct our love toward God, and toward man. These are the primary commandments, "To love the Lord our God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind," and "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37-38). These are the greatest commands, and our greatest challenges.

**God's Standards for Love.** Jesus, John, Paul, and others give us an array of requirements concerning love. What they have given to us are God's standards for love. We must do what is required. If we don't, we are breaking God's rules, and that is known as *sin*. Remember, sin is the opposite of love, and there are many ways to slip into it. If you aren't kind, you are sinning. If you are envious, boastful (proud), rude, self-seeking, irritable, begrudging (keeping a record of wrongs), or applauding injustice, guess what? Sin! If you are not thinking the best of others, or can be called "unhelpful", you are failing God. Love doesn't fail. WE fail. And by not loving, we keep on sinning, even if no one sees it. The checklist for love is so difficult and long that it is staggering. But we are charged to accommodate it. It's not optional.

**Loving People.** We'll see the lists as we go along, strings of things we *must do* (or *cannot do*), and they seem endless. The first big requirement is to love people. Love for people translates into an attitude which becomes a set of actions portraying compassion for all kinds of human conditions and deficiencies. Love is on the inside, but evidence for it is seen on the outside. If it's not showing on the outside, it's more than likely not existing on the inside.

Relieving suffering is often seen as the noblest objective of love, which is fine in and of itself, but that is not the ultimate point of love. Love for the "general population", from God's view, has as its goal the presentation to the world of a divine goodness that will attract unbelievers into a consideration of the reality of God and the viability of Christ's love and work. And love for Christian "brothers" is seen as a bond among believers that will enable them to care for each other's needs...to grease the wheels of Christian engines...to facilitate completion of the mission of the church, which brings Christ to the world. Love comes out as heart-felt caring for people, but its purpose is to show the light and love of Christ.

Love that promotes the Savior of mankind and the God of All, and that fulfills all of God's requirements for us, must receive our full attention. Understanding what love is, and what it is supposed to look like in us (and from us) deserves a thorough examination.

Jesus had a great deal to say about love. He gave us a new commandment in John 13:34-35, which is, "that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another." He and the apostles emphasized this over and over: love the brothers and love God. Scripture is clear: if we do not love the brothers, we do not love God. Jesus was also specific about us loving our *enemies* (Luke 6:27-31).

- Love your enemies.
- Do good to those who hate you.
- Bless those who curse you.
- Pray for those who mistreat you.
- If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also.
- If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic.
- Give to everyone who asks you.
- If anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.
- Do to others as you would have them do to you.
- Lend to your enemies without expecting repayment.
- Do good to your enemies.

In this same passage Jesus says, "But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them" (v. 32). This love occurs naturally as a part of routine human interaction where reciprocity and affinity exist. If the commandment said, "love those who love you", we could do that with relative ease. But He is asking us to love our enemies.

## *Studies on Getting Closer to God*

In Mark 12:30 Jesus asks us to “love your neighbor as yourself”. He wants us to take care of our neighbors the same way we take care of ourselves. The assumption is that we DO take care of ourselves, which hails back to our earlier discussion about all our “needs” and “survival instincts” and so on, that give us self-awareness and self-care. The sinful nature is directly tied into these, so we need very little encouragement to “love ourselves”, and the notion that we have to love ourselves *first* is a myth.

The demands to love people, as we have seen, are imposing. But not with God. Like everything we have studied so far, we know that *we* cannot do it. But God can, and by following His ways for getting this love thing right, He can do through us what we are incapable of doing by ourselves. When we understand “His ways”, we will know how to love. That is where we are headed. In the meantime, we want to see some additional parameters for loving people.

Paul provides a good checklist for loving people in 1 Cor. 13. His description bakes down, as follows:

- Love is patient (allows time for people and events)
- Love is kind (nice facial expression, kind words, pleasant tone of voice)
- Love does not envy (doesn't want what others have)
- Does not boast (not bragging or promoting self).
- Is not proud (humble, recognizes others)
- Is not rude (doesn't cut in line, insult, use sarcasm)
- Is not self-seeking (oh-oh)
- Is not easily angered or irritated (John 18:23)
- Keeps no record of wrongs; ignores insults or wrong
- Does not delight in injustice, but rejoices in the truth
- Always bears all (endures without complaint)
- Always perseveres (isn't lazy in helping others out)
- Love never fails
- Love is greater than faith and hope

Romans 19:9-21 points up other practices that should be seen among Christians. These are practical requirements for showing love:

1. Honor others above yourself.
2. Keep your enthusiasm for service alive.
3. Be joyful in hope (good times are coming).
4. Be patient in affliction (bad times have come).
5. Be faithful (consistent) in praying for each other.
6. Share with God's people in need.
7. Practice hospitality.
8. Bless your persecutors (not curse).

*Studies on Getting Closer to God*

9. Rejoice with people who are rejoicing.
10. Mourn with those who mourn.
11. Live in harmony with each other.
12. Associate with people of low position.
13. Do not be conceited.
14. Do not repay evil for evil.
15. Do what is right in the eyes of everybody (give no offense).
16. Live at peace with everyone (as much as possible).
17. Do not take revenge (leave room for God's wrath).
18. If your enemy is hungry, feed him.
19. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
20. Do not be overcome by evil.
21. Overcome evil with good.

As a result of what is being required of us, I think we can see that the simple command to “love others as yourself” ramifies into a very rigorous exercise for us. Love: This is what we are being asked to do toward people. But there is a second “tall order” given to us, and this is that we must love God.

**Loving God.** The first thing we would like to know is exactly what love for God is. We have studied the topics of acknowledging God and the fear of God, and these talk about how great God is and how small we are. But what does it mean to “love God”? Is it respect? Recognition of superior power? Submission to the Great Provider? These align with acknowledgement and fear, yet love seems to go far beyond these. After all, we are to love God with all our hearts and souls and minds. And “all” means “ALL”. Loving God is our ultimate praise, worship, and glorification...and we do this *inside ourselves* with all the strength we can avail (NOTE: the word is “avail”, not “generate”).

Our love for God begins as an invisible process...between Him and us...conveyed to Him through prayerful worship. The evidence for this love will be our doing the things that have been called for in all our previous studies: studying, praying, confessing, growing, fearing, and acknowledging, and by our exhibiting God's love to the world. By doing these things, we show that we are obeying God.

Our love for God, the love itself, is complete emptiness and stillness before His fullness and power. We bring our “nothingness” to His “everything”. This is what pleases Him. When we glimpse His everlasting completeness from our place of deficiency, we say to Him, “I cannot clearly see your total greatness, but I see my nearly-invisible smallness.” It is here that we begin to see that love for God is more than awe...more than surrender...it is disappearance into Him. Before Him we can only declare our nothingness. Our love for Him is the ultimate faith, the deepest reverence, the most essential bended knee, the truest humility, the most fervent prayer, the loudest praise, the sincerest thanksgiving, the greatest vision, and our highest calling. Love is finally seeing God, when we can say, “Yes. Abba, Father”.

**Love Comes From God.** Love starts with God. He is already Love. We love only by participating in His love. By being close to Him, by spiritually “touching” Him, we draw on His power and this power sends love into us that we could never experience on our own. The Bible tells us ways that we can get to this love, bathe in it, feed on it, grow with it, and become it. We want to begin looking more closely at these things now.

A preliminary condition for participating in God’s love is the confession of our sins to Him. We must be in fellowship. The first chapter of 1 John deals with our fellowship with God, and cites confession of our sins as the way to get it. The second chapter of First John gets into conditions and outcomes of being in or out of fellowship. Believers in fellowship know God (v. 3), obey God (v. 3 and 5), have God’s love in them (v. 5), walk as Jesus walks (v. 6), love the brothers (v. 10), live in the light (v. 11), do not love the world (v. 15-16), do the will of God (v. 17), and know the truth (v. 20-21). Believers out of fellowship do not obey God’s commands (v. 4), live in the darkness (v. 9), hate the brothers (v. 9), love the world (v. 15), do not have the love of the Father in them (v. 15), and may even deny Christ (v. 23). So the distinction between two outcomes is clear, encapsulated in the following:

1. Good comes out of being in fellowship with God: love, Jesus-walk, learning truth, doing the will of God.
2. Nothing good comes from being out of fellowship: don’t obey, live in darkness, hate the brothers, love the world.

Love comes from fellowship with God, our full connection with His powerful Self. When we are in fellowship, we are controlled by the Holy Spirit and He fills us with His love. This is the fruit He bears in us. To find out more about how His love can operate in us, we will comb further through the Scripture.

In John 17:26 Jesus said the following in a prayer to His Father: “I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.” Jesus wanted them to *know the Father*, so the Father’s love could be *in them*. The more we know God through His Word, the more the love He has for Jesus moves to the inside of us...becomes part of us.

**Fruit of the Spirit, as Opposed to Products of the Sinful Nature.** It is the Holy Spirit who delivers the love. “God has poured out His love into us by His Holy Spirit, whom He has given us” (Rom. 5:5). He is pouring it out, but if we are out of fellowship, our buckets will have holes in them, and we won’t hold it for long.

Love is one of the fruits of the Spirit. Galatians 5:22 lists some of these fruits: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such there is no law.”

The fulfillment of the law is found in love, so love is the sum of all these fruits. There is nothing in the law that love does not satisfy, and no law exists that brings love into question. So if love is the primary fruit of the Spirit, the filling or control of the Spirit is the condition that enables this to



happen. On the other hand, the sinful nature, with its passions and desires (greed and lust included for sure, but throw in self-interest for good measure) will produce the following:

...sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like.

See any love in these? Nope. How about self-interest? Yep. Loaded with it. It's all about me. Nothing left for Christ. And the love of God is M.I.A. Self interest produces the opposite of love: sin, such as being conceited, provoking, envying. Those who are controlled by Christ have crucified the sinful nature. As long as the Holy Spirit is at the helm, the sinful nature has no life with which to motivate us. But that nature is easily awakened, because we sin so quickly and disable the Spirit within us. This means confession needs to be loaded and ready, with the safety off, so we can—again and again and again and again—restore the power of the Spirit within us and see His fruits being displayed once more. We can be freed to love again.

And by the way, if you think you do not sin, or that you just sin once in awhile, and if you think confession is something to do at the end of the day as you kneel by your bed, better think again. Check up on God's standards. If we think we do not sin, we are using the wrong standard. Sin is ubiquitous...it's everywhere....and it starts tiny. With the slightest slip, the sinful nature takes over, and we are operating on our own puny batteries again. We've unhooked from the main circuit. To get a grip on this slippery slope of holiness, we've got to stay on our toes (a metaphor for staying "on our knees")...we must KEEP ON CONFESSING.

Alright, we've settled it. We are confessing as often as we pray (without ceasing). What else can we do? In Eph. 3:16-20 we see the source of our strength and love in the prayer that Paul is praying. He asks, "...that out of God's glorious riches, He may *strengthen you with power through His Spirit* [emphasis mine] in your inner being." Paul prays that the Ephesians will be "rooted and established in love" and grasp the immensity of the love of Christ and "know this love that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." God is then able to do "immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to *His* power [emphasis mine] that is at work within us..." The Holy Spirit strengthens us and establishes us in love, so he can operate and love through us.

In Ephesians 4:1, we see that we can "live a life worthy of the calling" that we have received. This is a life of love. Our gifts can then operate in love and our mission can be accomplished...and we will "build others up" (Eph. 4:12, 29). The power for our gifts comes from the Holy Spirit, which is the reason that Eph 5:18b says "...be filled with the Spirit". The immense love of God and the "doing immeasurably more" all come from God within us.

Paul shows us the major resource for building love in Phil. 1:8-11. He says that he longs for them "with the affection of Jesus Christ" (v. 8). He is saying this "affection" is not from him, but from Jesus Christ. Then in verse 9 he prays that their love will get stronger as they increase "knowledge and all discernment...being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ." Christ

has the affection and it is His righteousness that yields the fruit. The love gets stronger *through learning about God in His Word*. We grow in His love by feeding on His Word.

**Passages Calling for Us to Allow God's Love to Flow Through Us.** The following verses beckon us to let the love of God flow *from Him through* us:

- 2 Thess. 3:5 reads, "May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the patience of Christ." Just prior to this, verse 3 tells us that "He will strengthen and protect you." He is strengthening US and will direct our hearts into His love. It is quite clear what (Who) the source is.
- In 1 Titus 1:12 Paul says he thanks Jesus, who *enables* him.
- 1 Peter 1:22-23 admonishes, "Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth, through the Spirit, love one another with a pure heart." When our sins are confessed, our heart is pure, and we can love.
- 1 John 4:7 states, "Let us love one another, for love comes from God."
- Eph. 5:1 charges us, "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us."
- I John 4:16 gives us this, "We know how much God loves, and we have put our trust in Him. God is love, and all who love live in Him [in fellowship]. If you love God, love your brother."

These are just a smattering of scriptures dealing with love and its source. God is love. Love comes from God. We do not have this love (God-love) within us naturally. We live with many conditions that create conflict for us, including survival instincts, selfish motivations from our own psychology, and a scarcity of resources among us, not to mention the tug of our sinful nature, the world, and Satan. These make it hard for us to love the way we must. In fact, we cannot. The commandment we must honor can only be fulfilled by the One who gave it. Only through God can we love...other people...and God Himself.

**Summary.** In summary, here is a line-up of truths dealing with God as the source for our love, and the verses from which they are derived:

1. Love is a fruit of the Spirit...generated by the Spirit. (Gal. 5:22)
2. Jesus makes the Father known to us, so the Father's love can be in us. (John 17:26)
3. God pours His love into us by His Holy Spirit. (Rom. 5:5)
4. Love is the *ultimate* fruit of the Spirit. (1 Cor. 13)
5. Confession of sin restores fellowship, so the Spirit can love through us. (1 Jn. 1:9; 1 Pet. 1:22-23; 1 Jn. 2:3-23)
6. In fellowship God's love is made complete in us. (1 Jn 4:12)

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7. When we become rooted and established in love, we can be filled with the fullness of God and He can do much more than we imagine by His power at work within us. Then we can live in love. (Eph. 3:17-19)
8. Knowledge and discernment increase love. (Phil. 1:9)
9. God can make our love increase and overflow for each other. (1 Thess. 3:12)
10. When we “keep God’s Word” (learn Scripture) God’s love is perfected in us. (1 Jn. 2:5)
11. Love is from God. (1 Jn. 4:7)
12. Love increases within the mature believer by knowing God’s Word. (1 Jn. 2:5)
13. Whoever loves his brother is in the light. Whoever hates his brother is walking around in darkness. (1 Jn. 2:9-11)
14. In fellowship God’s love is made complete in us. (1 Jn 4:12)

We have to go back to the basics, as presented in all the previous studies we have looked at. Love is the goal. It is God’s best for us and in us. By acknowledging him, confessing our sins, fearing Him, always learning more about Him, praying to Him, and thanking Him, we are growing into His love. But this study on love takes the topics we have studied before to a new level, where we no longer see ourselves reaching up to an infinite God, but we see God reaching down to us...with His love. He has come to us, and we must stay close to Him. We are safe there...in the warmth of His eternal love.

Finally, the importance of spiritual maturity in our Christian walk, and as part of our sharing in God’s love, cannot be overstated. That topic is so important that we will give it separate treatment in the following study: “Maturity”.

## **Maturity**

**Our Goal is Maturity.** Maturity, perfection, completeness...are repeatedly called for in the Scripture. The definition of this term, as it relates to Christians, will become clear as we proceed through this study. It's something we are supposed to do...believers are expected to move toward maturity, to get closer to God, to become more resistant to evil, to love Christ as He loved us, to trust God, to endure suffering patiently, and so on. Why is it that too few of us are seriously moving toward these things, where the power of God will be able to work through us...where we can actually *know* Jesus, and where we will find greater grace? Why is it that we do not see greater maturity among believers?

It is important for us to see what the Bible says about this, so we can see how to bring maturity about. Matt. 5:48 says, "You must be complete, as your heavenly Father is complete." Jesus is pushing for spiritual godlikeness. In v. 43-47 He is calling for us to show Christ-like love—for our enemies, of all things—and this is something we *assuredly cannot do by ourselves*. We will be *truly complete* when Christ returns or when we are called to heaven. Until then, our job is to work toward maturity in Christ, in time. To grow, as we shall see, we must be fed. But if our diet is sin, the thing we feed on will just make us hungrier, and eventually we will starve. Sin is the biggest obstacle to our growth.

**Paul Admonished Growth Through Study.** Paul understood the importance of maturity. It was his goal to "present everyone mature" (Col. 1:28). Paul declared in v. 25-28 that his commission was to teach the Word of God to believers:

...to present to you the word of God in its fullness...the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now *disclosed* [emphasis mine] to the saints...We proclaim Him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present every one perfect [mature] in Christ.

Right out of the chute, we are seeing that Bible study is the key to maturity. Paul is teaching them with "all wisdom" so they can mature *in Christ*.

Christ is the place (person) where the "full riches of complete understanding" are hidden (Col. 2:2), meaning the "treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). Knowing Scripture is vital to avoiding evil, but it also enables us to be "rooted and built up" in Christ, and to be "strengthened in the faith" because we have learned about Him from *His* treasure chest (Col. 2:4-7). He is the source; His Word is the resource.

The objective of instruction from God's Word is that we be "built up". For this reason God has given each of us a "measure of grace" (Eph. 4:7) in the form of gifts. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor/teachers (v. 11) are there to do this:

...prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up, until we all reach unity in the faith [believers, united and organized among themselves] and in the knowledge of the Son of God, and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4: 12-13).

Two things happen in verses 12 and 13:

1. The body of Christ (the church) is built up until we all reach unity in the faith (the Christian movement). Instructional gifts operate to help us get prepared for works of service within the unified organization.
2. The instructional gifts also unify us "in the knowledge of the Son of God", so we "become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." Maximum knowledge brings maximum maturity, and maximum maturity brings the fullness of Christ.

The outcome of these verses is that we become "full", or fully fed. This meaning is made clear in the verses that follow, beginning with verse 14.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth [Scripture] in love we will in all things grow up into Him Who is the Head, that is Christ (v. 14-15).

By being fed, or "full" of Christ through knowledge of Him, we can move out of the "infant stage" and begin our developmental pathway toward maturity. This is essential, because, as long as we are infants, we will have no resistance to false teaching. But as we mature, we GROW UP, and not only grow up, but grow up INTO HIM. Eph. 4:21 follows up on this by saying, "You heard about Him and were taught in Him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus." Work back through it. The truth is IN JESUS, and this is the truth that we HEARD ABOUT and were TAUGHT. It is clear: the truth in Jesus is His very Word, and this is what we must hear about and be taught so that we can become equipped to "live a life worthy of the calling we have received" (Eph. 4:1).

Colossians 1:9-13 adds to this. In verse 9 Paul tells us that God can fill us with knowledge of His will through "all wisdom and understanding" (knowledge of His Word that has been processed by faith). We need this because it enables us to "live a life worthy of the Lord" and "please him in every way..." (v. 10). When we are "strengthened with all power according to his glorious might", we have "great endurance and patience, and joyfully give thanks to the Father" (v. 11). Knowing scripture is the way to achieve a life worthy of him, or *maturity*, so we can please God in every way. It's not as easy as it sounds. Few achieve this. But we keep moving on...and up.

**Paul Had Not Reached "Perfection", But Was Progressing.** Paul does not consider himself to "have been made perfect" (Phil. 3:12), but he is pressing on "toward the goal to win the prize" (Phil. 3:14). He may be comparatively "mature", but he is still progressing. "All of us who are mature should take such a view of things, and let us live up to what we already attained" (v. 15 and 16). Back in v. 10 Paul said he wanted to "know Christ and the power of His resurrection". In v. 12, Paul said he had not obtained all this, so he wasn't there yet. The obvious goal for Paul was to

be “resurrected” with Christ (v. 10), but he also wanted to reach the pinnacle of maturity that is possible for believers in time. Paul wanted to know “the power of His resurrection” while he was alive on earth (v. 10), as well as at the second coming of Christ. When we know this power in time and in life, we can “live up to what we have attained” (v. 16). We can live up to the life within us (the life of Christ) when we know the full power of His resurrection, which is only possible by learning about Him. And we can know Him through His Word.

**The Relationship Between “Being in Fellowship” and “Being Mature”.** There is an important point we need to interject here concerning “being in fellowship” and “being mature”. Immature believers can confess their sins and be in fellowship. The problem is, they don’t stay there for long because, as we shall see, they cannot resist all the evil forces coming at them. The result of this is that sin will occur easily, and fellowship will be lost. Nonetheless, as long as they are led by the Spirit (in fellowship) they can learn...and move toward maturity. Here’s an important point: maturity brings intensity, because faith becomes stronger. As we know God better, the things “in Christ” are more evident in us, and we become more vigorous in the possession and exhibition of godlike qualities, because maturity stabilizes our walk, resulting in more time in fellowship. As faith grows, we will be more faithful in exercising God’s methods for maintaining fellowship, and the more we are in fellowship, the quicker our faith will grow.

**Being “Built Up” Into Maturity.** Notice that the word maturity implies *progression*. There are levels of maturity, from infancy to full maturity. We move from an early state or condition to an advanced level of spiritual existence. Paul wants every believer to become mature, or to reach a high level of spiritual growth. This is why he kept teaching them.

By knowing about Christ, we can be “rooted and built up in Him”. To be built up, we had to have previously been operating at some lower or beginning level, a point from which we “build up” to some higher level. If we can be “strengthened in the faith”, that means we came from some prior place where we were weaker in the faith. Do you see? We CAN GROW. If you feel weak today, and you keep falling back into sin, there’s hope. You can outgrow this weakness. If we are fed the Word, beginning with “milk” and progressing to more solid food until we are taking in the “meat” as more-mature believers, we will grow until we will reach full maturity. This is when the treasure chest really opens and we finally understand what grace is all about.

In Hebrews 5:12-14, we see the milk and meat analogy played out:

In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food. Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

It is important to know that time logged as a Christian means NOTHING when it comes to maturity. “Why, I’ve been a Christian for forty years...got saved when I was six years old.” But you’re still a pre-schooler if you haven’t grown in the Word during that time. For those who have

matured, however, they know good from evil, and are able to practice “righteousness” and avoid sin.

Hebrews 6:1 continues this, saying, “Therefore, let us leave the elementary teaching about Christ and go on to maturity.” You must get deeper into the Word to go on to maturity. Or you can just sit in kindergarten for the rest of your life, with the result that your sinful nature and sin itself and Satan and the world will all feast on you and destroy you. We have the option to go on, move up through the grades, know the whole truth, and live in the strength and wisdom of Christ. Or we can just go to the playground.

**The Right Way to Be Built Up.** Please understand, also, that it is not just a matter of “time” in the Word that leads to maturity, even though we have already called for this. It is a matter of *quality* time. Your growth pattern and speed will depend on the *quality of instruction* that you receive. Where’s the beef? Research it yourself. Read about it. Compare. Pray for wisdom. And find a church that offers meat. Believers don’t need to hear about the plan of salvation and the ravages of hell every time they come together, because this does not build them up...or edify them. They need to know about confession, prayer, the fear of the Lord, the power of the resurrection, how to stop sinning, and so on. These are the things that lead them closer to God, where they can draw on His strength for living. And pastors and teachers must feed the believers in their care. This means they must study and teach God’s Word fully.

Finally, even exposure to the meat does not guarantee you will become mature. The issue is faith. As you hear the Word, you must believe it. This is crucial. If you hear the truth, even if you understand it intellectually, it will do you no good if it does not reach your soul. You must believe it for it to process. Being in fellowship is the first part of this, as we have seen, but then you must open your heart in faith for it to become a part of you. For meat to provide life-sustaining nutrients, it must be digested. For the Word to cause you to grow, you must make a decision to believe what God is saying. Hebrews 4:2b says, “...the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.” 1 Tim. 3:7 cited believers who were not growing, and explains one reason they weren’t: “...always learning, but never able to acknowledge the truth”. They did not believe the truth they learned intellectually, so it never processed into their hearts, and growth could not happen.

Believers mature by learning and believing the doctrines of Scripture that tell them how to please God, and advance in their faith. We begin by “understanding” (hearing and believing) the Scripture, which becomes “wisdom” as we grow. In later studies we will see other things that contribute to maturity, especially God’s training program that exercises our faith and makes us stronger...but for now, our emphasis is on Bible study as the primary means for feeding us and causing us to grow.

Everything good comes out of becoming mature. Little or nothing gets done by infant believers. Maturity will be the ultimate consequence of all our studies, and will magnify all the techniques God has designed that enable us to participate in His life.

## Giving Thanks

**God Wants Us to Give Thanks.** Giving thanks is something that is either done or called for throughout God's Word. This topic fits nicely with previous topics in that it adds to the concept of acknowledging God and the fear of the Lord. In this study we will see 1) the call for us to give thanks, 2) examples of what to be thankful for, 3) the reasons and conditions for giving thanks, and 4) the value of thanksgiving in our relationship with God.

Thanksgiving is ubiquitous in all the books of the Bible, but in none more so than Psalms. David gave thanks, talked about giving thanks, and exhorted thanksgiving throughout the book of Psalms. One song of thanksgiving was cited in Chronicles, where he implored, "Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name" (1 Chron. 16:8a). Again and again in Psalms, he admonished giving thanks, as in Ps. 100:4, "Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name." God was expressing through David the importance of giving thanks.

ph. 5:4, thanksgiving is commanded as a spiritual activity, as opposed to obscenity and other behaviors that go against God and grieve Him...things for which God said there should not even be a "hint". God says, "Giving thanks: DO. Sin: DO NOT DO." Thanksgiving, unlike sin, *pleases* God.

In the Old Testament, sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise were used as part of the prescribed rituals, but God likes direct, personal thanksgiving and praise *better*, because they come straight from the heart. Ps. 69:30-31 declare God's preference:

I will praise God's name in  
Song  
and glorify him with  
thanksgiving.  
This will please the Lord more  
than an ox,  
more than a bull....

God beams when we give Him thanks; it adds to His glory.

**Thanksgiving and Prayer.** Thanksgiving is a big part of prayer. In Scripture prayer and thanksgiving are seen in tandem. Prayer is something to do all the time, and thanksgiving trails right along with it. We see this in Phil. 4:6-7, as follows:

Do not be anxious in 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 minds in Christ Jesus.



To pray or present requests to God “in everything” or in every condition, we pretty much have to do it without ceasing. Since thanksgiving is prayer’s traveling companion, thanks should be given ALL THE TIME. Give your requests AND give thanks...in everything.

The verse above from Philippians connotes supplication, or praying for supplies, allowing God to meet our needs. Thanksgiving should accompany supplication. But we should also thank God as part of other kinds of prayer, as we see in 1 Tim. 2:1, “I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving be made for everyone.” Requests, prayers, and intercession are *all types* of prayers. Thanksgiving is the important “tag-along” for all of them. It is the punctuation and epilogue for every prayer, and keeps the credit flowing where it is due...toward God.

While we are on prayer, there is something that God wants us to do while we are praying, and that is to *be alert*. We have to be on guard, because there ARE bad things out to get us, namely the sinful nature, the devil, and the world. We have to be on *full alert* all the time. Giving thanks accompanies our watchfulness. Colossians 4:2 says, “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.” We are praying and watching and thanking...DEVOTED to these...and doing these non-stop. This is the Christian life: praying and watching and giving thanks. If we do these continually, we will avoid the snares that are set for us. “Watching” refers to looking out for evil influences, and observing our own footing as we walk the paths of a wayward world. The edge is always close and it is so easy to slip. We must be keen to our own slippage, so we can confess our sins quickly, return to lives of prayer and thanksgiving, and get back on the path toward maturity.

**When We Mature, Thanksgiving Overflows.** If we do all this stuff right, and continue to grow in God’s Word, at some point we will mature as Christians, and then we will “overflow” with thanksgiving. Col. 2:6-7 tells us this:

...as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

This verse indicates four conditions seen in maturity. We will be...

1. rooted and built up, and
2. strengthened in the faith, because we are
3. taught well, so we will be
4. overflowing with thankfulness.

God likes it when thanksgiving overflows, because it glorifies Him. This alone is a good reason to do it...thank Him because it brings *glory* to Him. In 2 Cor. 4:15, we see this, “...the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.” The more thanksgiving there is, the more God is glorified, and the more He is pleased with us.

**Thanksgiving: Fruit of the Spirit?** There is a case for thanksgiving being a “fruit of the Spirit”. Giving thanks has a strong connection with praise and glory...this is seen repeatedly, especially in Psalms. But it is also linked with joy. When we express joy toward God, this is a form of

thanksgiving. This is suggested in *Vine's Concise Dictionary of the Bible*, where he says thanksgiving is joy expressed toward God and is therefore a fruit of the Spirit. This is delineated in Gal. 5:22, where the fruits include "love, joy, peace", and so on. (Endnote 5). This is palatable, since thanksgiving is a good thing, and all good things come from God, initially, and then they are returned to God from believers operating in His power. Even thanksgiving comes from our connection with Him, and with His enabling us to do what pleases Him.

**What Should We Be Thankful For?** There are a number of things specified in the Scripture that we are to give thanks for. Here are a few of them:

1. Grace. "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" That gift is "surpassing grace" which God has given to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 9:15).
2. Strength for service. "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service" (1 Tim. 1:12).
3. Food. Two examples: 1) "...foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe" (1 Tim. 4:3), and 2) "The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it...." (1 Cor. 11:24).
4. When you eat...or when you don't. When you "eat, give thanks", and when you "do not eat, give thanks" (Rom. 14:6).
5. Strengthening for endurance. "When we are strengthened by his might, we have endurance and patience, and joyfully give thanks to God" (Col. 1:11-12).

These are examples of what we should give thanks for. But this limited list is just a start. The scope of thanksgiving is actually much larger than this. By examining more closely the issue of what we are to give thanks for, we can begin to understand what is really being asked of us. What follows here are three main areas that represent occasions for giving thanks:

- Give thanks in all that you DO. "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col. 3:17).
- Give thanks in all that HAPPENS. "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess. 5:18).
- Give thanks for EVERYTHING. "Always give thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph. 5:20).

**Do We Give Thanks in Bad Circumstances?** The list just cited pretty well covers the field. When you are alone or with someone, GIVE THANKS. That would be *all the time*. So you say, that's a snap. Think about it. What about misfortune? You run into a telephone pole, your high heel breaks, the mower falls apart in the middle of a mow...that's right, GIVE THANKS. Sounds hard, but thanksgiving actually helps us make it through such hard times (and *much worse*). Thanksgiving lifts the spirit. It resets our focus, returns us to a divine perspective, and reminds us that, "All things work together for good to them that love God..." (Rom. 8:28a).

Now, if bad things are happening because we are being disciplined by God, we need to confess our sins and get back in fellowship. But if they happen because God is teaching us, giving us pressure to help us grow and become stronger, blessing lies at the end of it. (1 Peter 3:14 and 17). In either case, whether we are suffering for discipline or suffering for growth, we should give thanks...for forgiveness of sins in the first instance, or for growth and blessing in the second.

**Thanksgiving and Acknowledging God.** David understood all about thanksgiving...why we should give it, and to Whom we should give it. Hear the following words, and observe his “acknowledgement” in the thanksgiving he is offering:

“O Lord My God, I will give you thanks forever” (Ps. 30:12).

“O give thanks unto the Lord” (Ps. 136:1).

“O give thanks unto the God of Gods” (Ps. 136:2).

“O give thanks unto the Lord of Lords” (Ps. 136:3).

“O give thanks unto the God of heaven” (Ps 136:26).

Apart from these being inspirational expressions of adoration and thanks for God, there is another layer of truth here. Can you see David’s acknowledgement of God? There is a connection between thanksgiving and acknowledgement (and fear of the Lord) in these verses. Notice the way he cites the greatness of God in the names he uses for Him.

Thanksgiving takes acknowledgement and fear of the Lord to a new level. Not only do we see God spiritually, and gasp in awe at His greatness, we also look at all we are and all we are supposed to do, and say, “I cannot do this without you.” When we thank God, it is not like thanking someone for holding the door open for us. Ordinarily, we can open the door for ourselves. When we thank God, we are acknowledging that we can’t do what He does, or what He asks US to do...without His direct assistance.

God’s grace does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He has saved us for all eternity, and now He lives through us. So when we thank Him, we say more than “thank you for saving my life”; we say, “thank you for *being* my life”. It is then we realize what He means to us, and why we have been given an eternity to get all the thanks in.

Let us give thanks, and acknowledge Him. “We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is, and who was...” (Rev. 11:17).

**From Thanksgiving to God-consciousness.** There is an extension to this study on thanksgiving that we want to cite briefly. All the topics we have studied are linked. Thanksgiving, prayer, confessing, knowing Jesus, learning Scripture, participating in the power of the resurrection, praise, fear, acknowledgement, faith, love, and so on; these are all part of one process: *God-consciousness*. And the techniques within this process work together. You can’t pray to God without acknowledging Him. You can’t trust Him if you don’t believe He exists as God. You cannot praise Him without giving thanks. These coalesce within our consciousness of God...do one of these and you touch them all. They are all tied together in our hearts. God-consciousness is

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about opening your mind, your heart, to God. Hebrews 3:1 says, “Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.”

When we maintain God-consciousness, through Jesus Christ, we see Him with us, think about Him, draw closer to Him, and give thanks to Him. This makes it possible for Him to work through us, and for us to watch His power at work. If we are to DO what God asks us to do, it does not begin with our setting out to meet His requirements or in beginning some project on His behalf. No. It begins with our fixing our thoughts on Jesus in all the forms we have studied: prayer, confession of sins, acknowledgement, fear of the Lord, knowing Him, seeing Him, studying Scripture, thanksgiving, faith, and love. Anything we do without God-consciousness will be done by our effort alone and will not turn out right. And God will not be pleased. We thank Him because *He does it*.

God is so particular that only what *He does* pleases Him, and there’s a razor’s edge between pleasing Him and not pleasing Him. Even so, that fine line is infinite, because it’s the difference between His doing it and our doing it. Fine line; BIG difference.

## **The Permanence of Salvation**

**The Conflict Over the Permanence of Salvation.** The issue of whether our salvation is permanent or not influences our understanding of much of Scripture, and the issue must be addressed. There is a swirl of controversy surrounding this topic, and we want to settle it here, as much as we can, to help us frame the studies that we are conducting. To enter this topic without bias is quite impossible, so I will say at the outset that it is my view that we are permanently adopted, sealed, and recorded at the moment of our salvation, and that nothing can reverse the eternal outcome of that event. These things seem unequivocal and undeniable, but we will look at them more closely.

There are some sincere and reasonable Bible scholars and Christian leaders who have taken an opposite view of our “status” after we are saved, and we will look at some of the scriptures they use to support their arguments. We want to know if our notion of the permanence of salvation can withstand the light of God’s Word. It is easy to stretch God’s Word to have it mean what suits us, and it is my prayer that I am not doing this as I consider this topic in the Bible.

**Scriptures Tell Us We Have Eternal Life.** To begin with, the scriptures deliver a clear message that we are the recipients of eternal life at salvation. We will look at a few of these.

In John 3:38-40, we see this:

I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me; and this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up at the last day. For this is the will of the Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.

According to this, those given to the Son by the Father will not be lost.

Of his sheep, Jesus said, as seen in John 10:27-29, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of the Father’s hand.” No one can remove me from the Father’s hand, not even me. In *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith*, Wayne Grudem said this regarding “they shall never perish”:

The Greek construction *on me* plus aorist subjunctive is especially emphatic and might be translated more explicitly, “and they shall certainly not perish forever.” (Endnote 6)

Assuredly, once we are in the hands of our Lord, He will keep us there.

There are other passages that point up the eternal nature of our kinship with God through our faith in Christ. Here are a few:

- John 3:36. “He who believes the Son has eternal life.”

- John 5:24. “Whoever hears my words and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned.”
- 1 John 5:13. “You have eternal life.”

Eternal life is, oh yeah, FOREVER! There is nothing temporary or “not permanent” about it. Seems straightforward. But there’s more. John 3:16 (who couldn’t quote it?) says, “Whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” Then v. 18 adds, “Whoever believes is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.” Romans 8:29-30 confirms this by saying there is “no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” The life we receive at salvation is ETERNAL.

**God Foreknew Our Decision to Believe in Christ.** Here’s another consideration: part of *God’s essence* confirms that salvation is one time, for all time. This is the indisputable reality of God’s foreknowledge. Romans 8:29-30 indicates that those whom God “foreknew”, He also “predestined to be conformed [shaped] to the likeness of his Son.” God chose us because He knew what we were going to do...*beforehand*. Our reshaping took place at the time we believed (were saved), an occurrence that God has always known would happen. (A likely second application of “being conformed” to the image of Christ could be that we are being “transformed” to His likeness in life, as we mature).

The question that comes up is this: If God foreknows the *exact* ones who will be saved or condemned forever and sees their eternal outcome, why would He adopt certain “temps” into His family, apply the blood of His Son to them, and seal them forever by the Holy Spirit, *already knowing* they won’t make the grade and will end up spending eternity in hell? Hard to imagine. If you are chosen, you are *well-chosen*, not the result of some divine oversight.

**God Keeps Us.** The idea of our never being separated from God’s love is also clearly enunciated in Scripture. Verses 30-39 in Roman 8 tell us clearly that we cannot be separated from the love of God. Not at all. Not by trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword; and not by death or life or angels or demons or the present or the future or any powers or height or depth or anything else in all creation (v. 35, 38-39). Nothing now or ever will be able to separate us from the love of our Father. God did not use disappearing ink to write our names in heaven. We are inscribed...permanently.

The sealing of the Holy Spirit is also part of our permanence in the family of God. Ephesians 1:13-14 gives us this, “Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption...”. Grudem said of this, “The Greek word translated ‘guarantee’ (*arrabon*) is a legal term that means the *first payment*, which obligates the contracting party to make all future payments. When God gave us the Holy Spirit to reside within us, He committed Himself to give all the further blessings of eternal life and a great reward in heaven with him.” (Endnote 7)

And there's more. 1 Peter 1:3-5 lets us know that we are *shielded* by God's power. Here is what the passage says:

He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

Shielded means “protected” by God's power. Can't touch that. If you're protected by God's own might, you have ultimate security. The “faith” seen in this verse is the faith of salvation, through which we have His eternal keeping. All that was asked of us was for us to believe.

**Sin Cannot Cause Us to Lose Our Salvation.** Now, there are many who say that sinning drops us out of the family. But believers sin. 1 Jn. 1:8 and 1:10 tell us that we sin, and that if we say we don't, we are liars. AS BELIEVERS, we sin. Paul says he can't stop his own sinful nature from making him do things he doesn't want to do, and preventing him from doing the things he should. Fortunately, God has provided a way for us to have our sins as believers removed, which is confession. 1 Jn. 2:1 tells us that, if we do sin, “We have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.” He defends us before the Father with the completed work of His sacrifice for us. He has to do this because, once again, *believers sin*. There are many examples of sinning believers throughout the Bible, but we want to cite here a couple you may have missed.

- In 1 Peter 2:1-3, Peter referred to the believers in his readership as “newborn babies”, and told them to crave “spiritual milk, so that by it you [they] may grow in your [their] salvation, now that you [they] have tasted that the Lord is good” (v. 2). They had been guilty of “all malice and deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind” (v.1), and Peter was telling them to rid themselves of these things. The point is this: these were true believers committing a whole list of sins, and they needed a different behavior pattern. Believers sin, but they still belong to God.
- The previous passage can be compared with 1 Cor. 1-3, where Paul also addressed believers as “infants in Christ” (v.1). He said he gave them “milk, not solid food, for you [they] were not ready for it” (v.2). The reason they were not ready for meat: “You are still worldly”, with jealousy, quarreling, and so on. “Are you not acting like mere men” (v. 3)? They were acting like unbelievers, because believers sin.

Sins that believers commit may draw divine discipline, but not condemnation. 1 Cor. 11:31-32 says, “If we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined, so that we will not be condemned with the world.” We “judge ourselves” by confessing our sins, so that we will not receive God's “spanking”. When believers “come under judgment”, they are “disciplined”, but not “condemned with the world” (the way unbelievers are). And that's how the sins of believers are handled. Confess or be punished. But our salvation is not affected by our sin.

Interject this notion: sin is horrible...the very reason that God sent His Son to die for us. It is not something to be taken lightly; our whole Christian experience and purpose is about getting sin out, and getting love in. But sins do NOT have the power to remove the safekeeping we enjoy from God for all eternity.

**You May Be a Christian Without Being a “Disciple”.** There are other ways in which it is claimed we may lose our salvation. John 8:31-32 is often used to suggest that salvation sort of “depends”...or “is contingent”...on something that happens after salvation. Jesus said, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.” Jesus is not saying they will be LOST if they don’t continue in His Word”; he says they will *not be true disciples*, or STUDENTS, of His teaching. You can be saved, and still not be a disciple...or student of the Word...since you won’t know the truth and will be a slave to your sinful nature, the world, and the devil. It is possible for us to disregard the truth after we are saved.

**A Different Kind of “Being Saved”.** Another passage used to indicate that salvation is tenuous is found in Matthew 10:22. This verse is talking about persecution of disciples by unbelievers. In v. 21 the subject of *physical* death is brought up, and this concept is carried over to v. 22, “All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.” Saved from what? Not eternal condemnation, but from physical death. They will be “saved” from those seeking to kill them. The concept of eternity is NOWHERE IN THIS PASSAGE. They will forego physical death if they endure, but if the heat (persecution) is simply too much, Jesus told them in verse 23 to just FLEE.

**The Issue of Perseverance.** There is a lot of discussion about “perseverance” until the end, or keeping our faith intact until Jesus comes or until we die. The idea is that we will be saved from eternal condemnation if we “endure” until our time is up. Otherwise, we may be dropped from the rolls kept in heaven. Scripture is used that seem to support this notion. Hebrews 2:1-3 gives us an example of such a passage:

We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him.

“Drift away”. What is this talking about? Drifting away from salvation? This is not what it says. We drift away from “what we have heard.” Messages of angels are binding, so how much more binding are the words of God Himself? Better pay attention to them. “Violations and disobedience” will certainly be punished among believers (divine discipline), even if the message comes from angels, but we have seen already that this takes place *instead of* condemnation.

We are among those of whom Jesus says He is “not ashamed to call them [us] brothers” (Hebrews 2:11b). But if we do not “pay careful attention”, or study His Word, we will “ignore such a great salvation”. In other words, we will ignore the salvation we possess, the life of Christ that is within



us, and the benefits of God's provision for our lives. It is important for us to grow and mature in our understanding and application of Scripture, but the absence of this does not condemn us to a lake of fire.

**The Fakers.** There is another objection to the permanence of salvation, having to do with people who "fake" salvation, or even feign fellowship with God. There are, of course, such people...con artists, who for their own gain, or in service to the devil, make themselves *look like* believers. These exist and should be spotted, and their tricky messages disregarded, as we saw in First John, where believers were distinguished from unbelievers. This does not detract, however, from the permanence of salvation, which is given to those who have believed in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 11:15).

Of the fakers, Jesus said many will cry, "Lord, Lord", to whom He will say, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers" (Matt. 7:23). These are false prophets that He told us to watch out for, because, "they come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves" (v. 15). These will not "enter the kingdom of heaven"; only those "who do the will of my Father who is in heaven" (v.22). And what is that will? That everyone be saved. God did not send His Son to die to take away the sins of the world on a whim. He wanted everyone to be saved from the condemnation earned by Satan and embraced by man through rejection of God. He wants all mankind to come to faith in Christ, and it is His will that His Son keeps all that come to Him. "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:40). Everyone who is saved is born again for all eternity. When we believed, we did God's will, and qualify now to the enter the kingdom of heaven. BUT...those who are faking it will not go in.

Some fakers are real prize-winners. Heb. 6:4-6 tells us that it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who were once enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, became partakers of the Holy Spirit, and tasted the goodness of the Word of God, if they *fall away*, since they crucify Jesus all over again, and hold him up to contempt. Such people went through all the motions, and were "close", but not saved. They did the following:

- were enlightened or taught
- "tasted" the heavenly gift (but did not ingest it)
- have "partaken of" the Holy Spirit (Greek: *metochous*, means "going along with")
- tasted the goodness of the Word (agreeing with some of it and quoting it)
- tasted the powers of the coming age (understanding prophesy)

When these "fall away" or leave the practices and fellowship of the church, it is very unlikely that they will ever become actual believers. Once they leave, after being so advertised as spiritual giants and leaders, they bring to Christ all over again the disgrace of His crucifixion. They ridicule and humiliate Him by attaching themselves to His name.

Take careful note of what is missing with these faith-actors. Not once in the description of what they did or showed is it stated that they believed in Christ, or that they were born again. It seems that almost any condition of Christianity can be faked. But these are not “believers” who fall away, but charlatans...unbelievers in believers’ clothing. Their show does not diminish the efficacy of Christ’s work, or truncate the salvation of those who have trusted Him.

**Continuation of Salvation (More on Perseverance).** Col. 1:22-23 is used to suggest that the continuation of salvation is conditional, citing a phrase in the passage that says, “...if you continue in your faith.” Look at the verses:

But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven....

This begins, “He has reconciled you.” This has already taken place; these Colossians have already been sealed by the Holy Spirit—no going back. Christ made this possible by His death...“to present you holy in his sight”. It has been well-established that we are “holy” for eternal purposes, even though we may be “dirty” on earth...in time. He will present us “holy” at the end, but for us not to have “blemishes or accusation” in life, we will have to be “made holy”, *in time*, through confession of our sins and continuing to build up our faith. For Him to appear when we are out of fellowship will be embarrassing to us, and we will likely lose rewards at the judgment seat of Christ. But we will still be “holy” before God, and we will live with Him forever. Even being out of fellowship when He returns does not mean we’ll be left behind.

“Continuing in your faith” (v. 23) does not mean the faith of salvation, but faith in Him in time, such as believing that He will forgive us when we name our sins, or believing in His provisions for our daily spiritual and physical lives. “Established and firm” refers to maturity. When we mature we will not be “moved from the hope held out in the gospel”. Our ultimate hope (faith) is that we will spend eternity with God; this is the pinnacle of good news. But there is another implication of this “hope held out in the gospel”, and that is the opportunity we have to participate in the ongoing power of the resurrection of Christ. The Good News, Part 1, is that He died for our sins. The Good News, Part 2, is that he rose from the dead and is NOW ALIVE! This is what Paul was striving for...to participate in the divine nature by sharing in the power of the resurrection (Phil. 3:16). Death at the cross lets us get saved; the power of the resurrection lets us live...now and forever.

This passage in Colossians does not say that we will NOT be saved, or that we will be condemned, if we are not totally free from sin or do not reach maturity as believers. It is already set in v. 22a, “He has reconciled you...” Anything beyond that takes place in time and is dealt with through the techniques we are studying.

**The Problem with Living Life So As to “Keep” Salvation.** When you believe in Jesus at a point in time, you received His life for *all time*, which is the opening act for *eternity*. You no longer

need to think about whether you are saved or not, IF you once believed and accepted Christ as your Savior. That salvation did not depend on you, and your keeping it doesn't either. Satan wants us to get hung up trying to solve problems that do not exist, such as trying to "stay saved", rather than spending time digging out God's truths for living, so we can mature. Satan fights against maturity. He wants us to stay babies, so he can trick us easily.

We should move on to the meat, and concentrate on whether we are using the techniques God has given us: confession, study, God-consciousness, prayer, faith, and so on. These will enable us to become mature and strong in Him. Pre-occupation with "spiritual insecurities" over our salvation will only hold us back in the lower grades (Heb. 6:1-2).

## **Commentary on the Permanence of Salvation**

The difficult task for those who propose that we can lose our salvation is specifying exactly what it is that causes this loss. Is it sin? If so, how many times do we have to sin...or how often? How severe does this sin have to be? Or is it a matter of *where we are* spiritually when our time is up? Did the timing of our death or Jesus' return just happen to coincide with a time when our sin was temporarily active...momentarily out of remission? Or is there a time limit on our sin...a length of time past which we are erased from the books in heaven? Is there a mysterious moment of "unsalvation"?

Can a loss of faith put us out? And if a diminution of faith causes us to lose our relationship with God, can we go back to Him, and how many times can this happen? Is there a set *quota* for the number of times we can go back?

The problem for those who say we can lose our salvation is that *the Bible gives no specifics about the process for this happening*. Nor is anything concrete offered about the *criterion* for our losing the eternal life we were given. Is God withholding something from us? The Word of God is very specific about salvation. When we believe in Christ, we are bought and paid for, and the results last forever. This is clearly enunciated over and over in the Scripture. But the process for being "lost" after salvation is not disclosed in the Bible!

Our spiritual *success* after we are saved may not be predictable. We can fail as believers, have hopeless lives, and even live in sin and unbelief. But these do not take us out of God's hands, because the life He has given us lasts beyond the end of time.

I also want to be clear about another thing. Faith brings no merit. Faith at salvation is sincerely saying "yes" to the offer Christ makes to us. At the moment we are saved, the transformational event of salvation changes our eternal direction. A quintillion things happen in that moment, but it is not our effort that does any of them...faith requires *no* effort. It is the infinite God Who does it all, somehow taking pleasure in the tiny creatures we are, responding to our faith, and dressing us for the occasion of standing before Him. But the clothes He puts on us are hand-me-downs from

our Big Brother, Jesus Christ. Without them, we could not even come in the house. With them we shine like a new penny, standing before God.

It is only through faith in Jesus Christ that we are born into His family. It is by God's quality and the work of His Son among us that we participate in His provision. We do NOTHING of ourselves to become part of His family, and how utterly arrogant it is for us to think that we can do something then to send God away. He is bigger than that. We cannot commit a sin that was not paid for on the cross. He did the work. He does the saving. Even our paltry little acts of goodness, generated by own wills, do not register on His huge scales. But we still think the world is flat, we are at the center, and it's all about us. Surely, we think, we have SOMETHING to do with our salvation. Such pride.

How can we ever get the picture of how grand and great our God is? Assuredly, if I misunderstand His grace and gift, then He can make righteous judgments that result in His disowning me. But I do not see this in Scripture. Salvation depends on Him entirely. Once we see this, maybe we can begin to see that the quality of our lives in time depend on Him as well, and we can start counting on Him to produce *in us* lives that are pleasing to Him, the way He produced our salvation when we believed in Christ.

These things are not based on logic. They are based on a perspective of grace...God's character. It actually makes very little sense logically that He should even care for us. Thank God...He does. We began by grace; how can we then attempt to keep what we are given by some means other than grace? We did not earn salvation initially, and we cannot now earn its perpetuation. It *ALL* depends on grace...or it all depends on us. Which can we trust?

## Faith in the Christian Life

**Faith Is a Mark of God's Genius.** Faith is a testament to the genius of God. The problem God faced early-on after creation was that the "creature" He had created had decided to follow Satan in that devil's fallen condition, which caused man to fall as well. The result of this was that man was no longer qualified for communion with an infinite and perfect God, so something had to be done to make man acceptable to God.

God had to create a condition for salvation, in order to provide Himself with a way for His own justice and righteousness to be satisfied. God chose to provide a covering, or cleansing, of man in his fallen state, so he would appear to be "not fallen". He decided to do this by sending His only Son to absorb the punishment for all the ugliness of man, so that man would have the opportunity to change his image. By accepting the covering that the Son made possible, the "badness" of those who accepted changed to "goodness", which satisfied God. The *process* of acceptance which God chose to use for this change was one involving "faith", or believing.

Faith was especially appropriate as a means for claiming the work of the Son, because it carried with it no form of merit. If the qualities of man played any part...even the tiniest part...in the process of making man qualified for contact with God, then the method would not work. God would not be satisfied, because the method would be tainted by human involvement. Any effort on the part of man could only serve to *displease* Holy God, however well-intended the effort. The entire weight of salvaging this creature had to rest entirely on the completed work of the Son. So faith was the solution. By faith, the creature man could access the work of the Son, and not lift a finger.

But is faith effort? No. Faith is not effort at all. Faith has no intrinsic value, requires no action, and exhibits no skill. Faith draws attention to its object, and the value of faith is vested entirely in that object. Faith is worth nothing by itself. Its value is in its object. The *object* of faith at the time of rebirth is Jesus Christ. By faith we accept His work and God accepts us. Without His work, God cannot fellowship with us and we cannot relate to God. But by faith we can have an eternal relationship with God without violating His justice or offending His righteousness. Problem solved.

**Faith After Salvation.** Then along comes life. We did *nothing* to get us into a relationship with God. But what now? I'm saved. Great. See you in heaven. I'm out the door to live my life. Wrong! Yes, you are saved. But you're just getting started with your *Christian* life.

We have studied numerous techniques that will keep us growing and fellowshiping and producing, and we know already that our eternal lives do not begin after our death or the return of Christ...they begin *now*. And while we are here on earth, we need all the tools in the tool chest to keep ourselves in repair for this journey.

So it is that we look at faith. Faith gave us access to the kingdom to begin with, and now it will play a significant role in the conduct of our Christian lives. Before we are through with this topic, we

hope to deal with—in some order—the meaning, importance, function, object, source, and activation of our faith.

We will be looking at many scriptures in this study that tell us about faith. The focus is on faith as it applies to our lives as Christians. The key to the study is found in God, not in our lives, even though life is where we make the application. Faith brings life and God together, and that's why we need to understand it.

So, recapitulating: At salvation, faith is our recognition of the work of Christ on the cross and an acknowledgement of His resurrection and current life at the right hand of the Father. Now we must carry this awareness forward into life *after* we are saved. We have instructions. Habakkuk 2:4 says, "The just will live by faith." 1 Cor. 2:5 tells us that faith is surrender to God's power, resting in His ability, rather than in human intelligence. This is so we can "live by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7), knowing that the lives we live in our bodies are lived by faith in Christ (Gal. 2:20). The value of our faith continues to be in its object, and that goes on for as long as we live. We were *saved* by faith and now we will *live* by faith.

If we depart from faith, or "shirk or shrink back", God will be displeased with us and He will make life miserable for us (Heb 10:38). But faith can be a great source of blessing and strength, as we shall see.

**What is Faith?** The first question is this: what is faith? Hebrews 11:1 says, "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." Faith is "being sure". It is interesting to note that the things that we *don't* see are the things that are the most powerful and the most important in our lives...and the things we are most sure of. We do not (generally) experience God through the senses, and therefore the most significant aspects of our lives are not "experienced" through our physical faculties. Experimentalist philosophers would certainly rail against such a claim, because *experience in the world* is their basis for truth and reality. Unfortunately, their reality does not include faith or the existence of God, because we can't physically "see" God. But, we have faith...and we have God.

We cannot see God, but we are *certain* He exists, and we *know* that His existence is before and beyond anything we can find in our "experience". Believing in God is "logical", but the basis for our relationship with God is *faith*, and not *experience*. The conduit for the passage of God into us, and our ability to touch and know Him spiritually...is grounded in faith. By faith, we are sure, and faith is surety itself. Faith does not "create" the reality of all that God is...God is self-existent and self-determinant forever...but it enables us to access that reality, and to become a part of it.

**Passages on Faith.** In order to highlight a maximum number of verses dealing with faith, we will present the ones we have selected for you in a bulleted format, including a brief label or discussion for each, as follows:

- Faith is the only thing that counts. "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love" (Gal. 5:6).

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- Faith is directed toward God.
  - “...that we should not trust in ourselves but in God” (2 Cor 1:8-9).
  - “Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.” (1 Pet. 1:21).
- Faith is *from* God.
  - “Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, ‘I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief’” (Mark 9:24).
  - “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2).
  - “...grace poured out on me, along with faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 1:4).
- Faith protects us.
  - “...putting on faith as a breastplate” (1 Thess. 5:8).
  - “...take up the shield of faith, with which you extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one” (Eph. 6:16).
- Faith brings God’s blessing.
  - “Those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham” (Gal. 3:9).
  - “Blessed are all those who put their trust in him” (Ps. 2:12).
- Faith avails God’s rest. God has a rest for believers which is entered by faith in His promises. When believers enter that rest, they “cease from their own works, as God did from his” (Heb. 4:10, along with the rest of Hebrews 3 and 4).
- Faith enables God to fulfill His purpose through us, as seen in this: “...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” (2 Thess. 1:11).
- We *live* by faith in God.
  - “We live by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7).
  - “The just shall live by faith” (Hab. 2:4).
  - “For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, the righteous will live by faith” (Rom. 1:17).
  - “I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live; yet not I but Christ lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God” (Gal. 2:20).
- Faith can increase.

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- "...count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2-4).
- "But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit" (Jude 1:20).
- "...rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness" (Col. 2:7).
- "Yet he did not waiver through unbelief regarding the promises of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God" (Rom. 4:20).
- "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17).
- Faith gets results.
  - "If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for" (Matt. 21:22).
  - "Ask for wisdom and you will get it, if you believe and do not doubt" (James 1:5-6).
  - "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 to you'" (Matt. 17:20).
- Faith gives the victory. "Everyone born of God overcomes the world...this is the victory...even our faith" (1 Jn. 5:4).
- Love comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith. "The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1 Tim. 1:5).
- Anything not of faith is sin. "But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith. Everything that does not come from faith is sin" (Rom 14:23).
- The absence of faith and confession will result in shipwreck, as seen here: "...holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith" (1 Tim 1:19).
- Without faith we cannot please God. "Without faith it is impossible to please him" (Heb. 11:6).

These verses are each a study in themselves, and we will see some of them again in this chapter, but the bulk of them will be left for future studies . I hope you will take time to re-visit these verses yourself and look more closely at the power of faith presented in Scripture. Faith seems to be at the pinnacle of everything else we have studied...right up there with love. Love is a manifestation of our connection with God, and faith itself is the connection. We relate to God by faith and then



produce goodness in His power by that divine connection. That makes this study one of the most important we have undertaken.

**The Question of “Faith” vs. “Works”.** One of the conflicts surrounding the topic of faith is the question of faith vs. action, or “faith”, as opposed to “works”. We have established in this and previous studies the smallness of man and his inability to please God on his own, and the bigness of God and His unique ability to please Himself through us. But there are those who claim that works play some part in the process of our being saved and in the Christian life. One of the main passages of Scripture used by some to advance the notion that works play a part in our rebirth is found in the book of James, chapter 2.

James 2:24 says, “You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.” Of this verse, John Calvin said, “Faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is not alone.” Martin Luther was so disturbed by this verse and the book of James that he called James an “epistle of straw”. (Endnote 8) We do not think it is necessary to discount the book of James; James just needs to be clarified.

A great deal of discussion has been generated about James’ writing on faith vs. works, but maybe it’s all “much ado about nothing”. It seems that most of the concerns about his comments come from those who insist that man has a role in salvation. Phrasing in the book of James can be misconstrued to fit that argument.

In James 2, he was actually making very reasonable, common-sense statements about those who claim to have faith but have nothing to back it up. To those who are by-standing onlookers, we cannot claim to have faith and then exhibit behavior that shows no evidence that such a faith exists. You can’t tell me that you have a powerful racing engine under the hood of your car, but your car won’t even move. Step up or shut up. What DO you have under there? You say your car is hot, but it never even gets up to the starting line. Why can’t I believe you? Meet me at the green light and I will show you what’s under *my* hood. Talk is cheap. So says James. There is more to this, but suffice it to say at this point that, “Faith without production is not convincing.”

Many verses tell us what our works should be, or what our walk as believers should look like. The result of our awareness of what we *should do* may send us off in random directions seeking to fulfill our requirements from God. We must remind ourselves of our limited capacity for righteous achievement...we must remember to turn to God. When we are *close to God*, He will give us the heart, the opportunity, and the resources to do what He requires. And He will be able to do this because we are participating in His nature, power, and will.

In James 2:14, James raises the question, “Can such a faith save him?” James was speaking of a dead faith, or the absence of faith as shown by external evidence. Such a faith does not justify for the onlookers the claims that one is a believer. This is obvious. The same can be said of faith in our lives as believers. The identical kind of faith that produced our salvation will bring about actions that reflect the *object* of our faith...Jesus Christ. If we claim to be in fellowship, yet live in sin, our claims are dubious to those who witness our behavior. The more faith we have, the more Jesus will be seen in our spiritual temperament and our actions.

We must be clear that James never intended to discount faith as the means of salvation, and his view on “works” is simply that they are manifestations of faith, both saving faith and living faith. Face it: If you have faith, it is going to show. If you do not have love and show kindness, or if you live a life characterized by selfishness or lust, YOU NEED TO WORK ON YOUR FAITH. God looks at the heart. All others see what you DO. Eph. 2:8-10 says, “We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus, to do good works, which he prepared in advance for us to do.” If we have faith, these good works will be done. Mature faith produces good works. This need embellishment, which will be forthcoming in future studies.

**Faith Brings Certainty.** Repeating an earlier point...when we have faith in God, we have certainty. In Hebrews 11:1, we saw, “Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” When I believe, I am *sure*. We want to enlarge on this point. I am sure Christ died for my sins and rose to sit at the right hand of the Father. I am sure Christ lives in me. I am sure I can do all things through Christ, Who strengthens me. I am sure God will provide all my needs. I am sure everything works together for good. I am sure nothing is impossible for God. I am sure His grace is sufficient for me. I am sure His Word is alive and powerful. I am sure that God’s peace will guard my heart and mind in Christ Jesus. I am sure He will never forsake me. I am sure I can cast my care on Him. I am sure He cares for me.

Faith does not allow for contingency. There is no “if” in faith. Faith is certain, and therefore faith is the same as knowledge. When we believe in the work of Jesus at salvation, we *know* it is effective because we believe it. When we study the scriptures, they become knowledge to us because we believe them. Hebrews 11:3 says, “By faith we understand...” Faith enables understanding. Conversely, understanding strengthens faith. Romans 10:17 says, “...faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”

Faith grows as we increase our understanding of Scripture. Then as faith grows and knowledge increases, uncertainty subsides. Faith also grows through God’s training. James 1:2-4 says 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.

We will study this concept in detail in future studies. The point we make here is that testing and trials build faith and maturity.

Incidentally, *hope* is also a posture of *certainty*. When we read the word “hope” in the Bible and try to make it fit the common usage of that word today, we envision a dichotomy of future conditions, wherein something may happen...or not happen. This is not the intent of this word in Scripture. Saying “I hope so” conveys weakness. Hope is faith...for the future...and it carries with it all the weight and force that faith does. Hope is unequivocal, as faith is. This is no guarantee that a specific *outcome* will happen in our experience, but it ensures us that the will of God will be done, and that everything will “work together for good”. Reality and certainty are seen in the OBJECT of our faith

(and hope). Faith in God is the embracing of God as a Reality, so that when we see the words “faith” or “hope”, we can translate them as “knowledge”.

**Faith Rest.** Paul is addressing “holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling” (Heb. 3:1). These are *believers*, clearly, who have been *called*, have *eternal life*, and are protected by a contract with God and by God Himself. Paul’s audience consists of believers.

In Hebrews 3:8, Paul says, “. . .do not harden your hearts as you [Jews] did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert.” In v. 10, he points out what God said about the Jews in the desert, “Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways. . .” The converted Jews he was addressing in this epistle were being reminded of the time when their “fathers” (v. 9) had been delivered from slavery, but were turning their backs on God. Notice that they never got into the Promised Land, because they never came to “know the ways” of God (v. 10). This does not mean they were not saved; it just means they were believers in a state of “sin”. They refused to learn and believe the lessons that God was teaching them through Moses. This prevented their growth and maturity. They could not enter the Promised Land, because they would not pay attention to God’s messages and requirements, but—still—they were “out of Egypt”. And they were NOT SENT BACK TO EGYPT, even though they were in rebellion. They were still believers.

Believers can develop hearts that are hardened, when they ignore God’s instruction (His Word). In Hebrews 3:11, we see, “So I declared on oath in my anger they shall never enter my rest.” And who were “they”? They were the Jews in the desert who *disobeyed*. They were sinning, not acknowledging, not in fellowship, not studying the Word (written in the form of sacrifices that depicted God’s truths), and—in v. 19—we see that they were in a state of “unbelief”. Believers? Yes. But in “unbelief”. They could not enter His rest, because they *were not believing* the promises of God. . .among them, that He would take them to the “Promised Land”. “So we see that they were not able to enter because of their unbelief” (v. 19). They were committing the sin of unbelief.

Paul declared that the Hebrew brothers he was addressing in this passage were sinning by not believing God’s promises. In verse 12 Paul cites “sinful, unbelieving” hearts that turn away from God and get caught in the throes of “sin’s deceitfulness” (v. 13). It is no surprise that there was sin in the camp. . .we know believers sin. But in verse 14, Paul says, “We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.” What is this confidence? It is faith. But faith in what? Our faith is in the Word of God.

The faith we had in Christ at salvation is now applied to His instructions and promises for our lives. Will we “share in Christ” if we do not exhibit this faith? No. We cannot share in the *fullness of the life of Christ* if we do not believe the Word of God pertaining to our walk as Christians. Does this mean we will no longer be saved? No. It means that we will not “participate in the divine nature” as we have seen in previous studies. *Sharing Christ* is *knowing Jesus*, seeing His face within our hearts, loving Him, acknowledging Him, fearing Him, having Him live through us, and having Him teach us by His Spirit. These are appropriated BY FAITH, and through them we “share in Christ”. Even

Paul had not *fully* accessed the power of Christ's resurrection, but he was working toward this (Phil. 3:10).

When we have faith in God's Word, and are engaged in God-consciousness as born-again believers, we can "approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (v. 16). This is where we belong IN THIS LIFE as Christians.

Hebrews 4:1, "Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it." This says that believers may "fall short" and not enter "God's rest". Once again, this rest does not refer to salvation. The message here is addressed to believers who may not measure up and may not see the rest that results from faith in the Christian life. Lack of faith for a believer prevents entrance into the place of "rest", meaning the "Promised Land" of the fullness of Christ.

Verses 9-11 in this chapter tell us what this rest is:

There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall [out of fellowship] by following their example [example of the Jews in the desert] of disobedience.

This rest is FOR BELIEVERS ONLY. In this passage, Paul does not want these believers to miss this rest by disobedience, which is "unbelief", the result of not absorbing God's Word and not accounting for their sins to God. Verse 12 (Chapter 4) says that the Word of God exposes sin, so we can give an account of them to God. Verse 13 continues by saying, "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." We give account to God, or open our books to Him, when we confess our sins. Oh, and you will be audited.

Reiterating, the Promised Land is not heaven. It is the fulfillment of all that God promises us for this life, to which we gain access by faith in His Word. It is the life of rest, the one we are meant to live as believers. Since we have been saved, we can now enter the rest God offers. Not entering this rest means, "There's no rest for the wicked", and we're in for a bumpy ride as believers.

**Faith Leads to Surrender.** It is time to get down to the core of this study. The point of faith, or of our "knowing" God, is *surrender*. Faith is the conductor; surrender is the endpoint. It is the most important component in our relationship with God. Surrender is the peak of acknowledging God, fearing the Lord, and being God-conscious. When we get close to God, we SUBMIT to Him, and to His will. He becomes more as we become less. God is in us...waiting for our submission to Him...so that He can open the gateway of our lives to His divine production. He produces IN us and THROUGH us. God IS. God DOES. How can we ever see this or describe it? This is the heart of being in Him...and Him in us; it is about surrender.

God is the source of all good things, the Ultimate Energy, the origin of everything. When we see this, we will fear Him, and surrender to him. Faith is Godward, as are fear and surrender, but it is

also lifeward. It brings the God we fear to the lives we live, and He meets all our needs. God is then revealed through us. We surrender to all He is, so we can become all He intends.

**Faith and Fear of the Lord.** We want more faith. Here's the process. Knowing and believing the Word of God leads to fear of the Lord, which increases faith. Pause here. We have discussed "fear of the Lord" in some detail, but it seems we can never get to the bottom of this well, so we just keep on digging. Fear of the Lord causes faith to grow. When we fear the Lord, we project toward Him admiration, adoration, reverence, worship, praise, thanksgiving, and so on. We are increasingly "God-conscious". Fear of the Lord also increases our understanding of Scripture. Psalms 111:10 says "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. All who follow his precepts have good understanding." Our fear of the Lord, our God-consciousness, cannot be separated from our faith.

When our fear of the Lord is strong, our God-consciousness keen, we will fulfill our purpose in connection with God. Philippians 2:12-13 says "...continue to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." The term "work out" means to bring to completion your own salvation, which is the life we live as saved people. This is done with "fear and trembling"...the fear of the Lord. You play out your own Christian life by showing the fear of the Lord. Now notice the word "for"...meaning "BECAUSE". God is about to give the reason we should have fear of the Lord. We show fear to Him because He is the one who works in us "to will and to act according to His good purpose". When we fear Him, acknowledge Him, and revere Him, he places in us the exact "wants" we should have, to produce the "acts" we should perform, to fulfill HIS GOOD PURPOSE.

When we fear Him, trust Him, surrender to Him, we will see the results and evidence of His work in our lives. Continuing in Philippians 2, look at verses 15 and 16, which give us the outcome of our fear and faith: that we will "shine like stars in the universe" as we "hold on to the word of life".

## God's Power and Grace

**Introduction.** We have clearly established where we are in the pecking order, with God at the top and us at the bottom. We understand that good things come *from God*, and that we produce nothing good, in and of ourselves. Now we want to look more closely at the forces behind God's "production", as seen in His grace and power. God wants to engage His power and grace to work in us and through us to fulfill His purposes. If we are going to be a player on His team, we have to *show up*...we have to be available to Him. This means that all our sins have to be forgiven (because we have confessed them) and we have to be conscious of Holy God (acknowledging, fearing, trusting, thanking, and so on). Then, to log maximum time in the "available" state, we have to become mature by knowing the "precepts" in God's Word. When we are available, God's power and grace can go to work in and through us.

**What are Power and Grace?** God's grace and power seem to work in tandem. They work together, but they are not the same thing. We will try to distinguish the difference.

*Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* described *power* as "the ability to act or produce an effect; the possession of authority." (Endnote 9) God's power holds the universe together, from the most complex and extensive galaxies to the tiniest quantum particles. Everything that exists is sustained by His power. His power surrounds, or causes, everything.

*Holman* defined *grace*, as well, describing it as "favor done freely without expectation of anything in return". (Endnote 10) Grace is God's attitude toward man. God loves man, and grace enables those of us who believe in Him to have fellowship with Him. Grace and love cause God to desire a relationship with us. This attitude of grace toward man was expressed ultimately at the cross when He gave His Son for our sins. By grace we were saved when we believed. Now, grace is seen in what He provides for our lives as believers...both material and spiritual. The medium, or transmitter, for God's grace is His power. Grace is given and sustained by God's power.

Grace can be used interchangeably with power, when power is directed benevolently toward man. By God's power grace flows toward man. By God's grace, man participates in God's power. They are inextricably intertwined.

**The Flow of Power and Grace.** Grace and power function more like water flowing through a pipe, whereby the water flows into a collecting pool (the pool would be *us*). As long as the "pipes" are open, grace and power can flow into us. But if we close the valve on them (by failing to acknowledge God, confess our sins, and use the other techniques we have learned), His power and grace will begin to dry up within us. This is why constant confession, faithful Bible study, and continuous, trusting God-consciousness are so important to keep grace and power flowing.

**What Power and Grace Do.** Without God's grace and power we are nothing. Every good thing that happens around us or through us will be the result of grace and power. They enable us to do

good deeds, overcome sin, testify to the resurrection of Christ, and use our gifts to help other believers in their walk. These qualities of God also allow us to do this:

1. Become God-like.
2. Fulfill in us all of God's requirements.
3. Enable us to please Him.
4. Create in us the love and righteousness of God.

And much more. But once again, the “doing” is from the “Great Doer”. God’s grace operates by His power which becomes, to the “available” believer, the means and opportunity for divine service.

Grace and power are integral parts of God’s character, and the cause and method for His sharing Himself with us. His grace prompts Him to exert divine energy on our behalf. God is always willing to impart Himself to us...the holdup is with us. We can’t get out of our human perspective. We are life-conscious or self-conscious, but not God-conscious. If we use it, His power is available to energize us and motivate us to do good things. That power “pulses” into us and CHANGES us. What’s more, it sets us free from the grip of our sinful nature, the world, and Satan. This is why we must *look at Him*, and not at ourselves. We must focus on Him, consider Him, fix our attention on Him. Confess, pray, acknowledge, fear, know, trust, and surrender: these open the gates to grace and power.

**God is the Source of Power and Grace.** God must remain in your consciousness. Keep coming back to Him. He is your reason for living. He is your life...more than any other entity or reality or threat or set-back or problem. He is eternal God. Remember it. Acknowledge it.

God is powerful...can’t say this loudly enough...scream it, amplify it! We are a God-blink away from annihilation. Yet HE LOVES US. Hard to imagine. His power is immeasurable, but so is His love. He chooses to express His power toward us in the form of grace. He has the “ability” to destroy, yet He shows “favor”.

In discussing God’s power with a visiting friend, Job delineated examples of God’s power as seen in creation and in the continuation of all the forces needed to keep earth intact and habitable. He expressed how great God’s power is. But then he said, “...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?” (Job 26:14) His reliable friend Elihu suggested this again in Job 36:26, “How great is God—beyond our understanding!” Then he provided hope that we can learn about God’s power in Job 36:22, “God is exalted in power. Who is a teacher like him?” In Job 27:11 Job said, “I will teach you about the power of God; the ways of the almighty I will not conceal.” So we can *know* about this infinite thing, God’s power, and then we can tell everyone about it (Ps. 68:34).

In Scripture we see divine power in Jesus Christ. Heb. 1:3 says, “The Son...sustains everything by the mighty power of his command.” Romans 1:16 tells us that the gospel *is* God’s power, and Philippians 3:10 shows us that there is power in the resurrection of Christ. As a member of the Trinity, the Son has power.

There is also divine power in the Holy Spirit and in God the Father. In 1 Cor. 2:4-5 Paul says the following:

My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

The entire Godhead is characterized by this power. In this passage that power is seen as the target for our faith. When we trust Him, we believe *He* has the power to do what needs to be done, "...that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us" (2 Cor. 4:7-11). God is "able to do immeasurably more...according to the power that is at work within us" (Eph. 3:20-21). God has the power...His power WORKS... in us. But too often we try to believe in ourselves and not in His power. Not allowed. He will get the credit! Even when we do "good"...it's not enough. 1 Pet. 4:11 reminds us that, if anyone serves, "he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ." If we do anything *by ourselves*, and not in His strength, the glory goes to us and feeds our pride and self-dependence. God won't permit this. He does it all. He gets all the glory.

**God's Power Is Available to Us.** God *is* all we need, and He *provides* all we need. 2 Pet. 1:3-4 makes the following powerful statement:

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness.

So we know God's divine power through knowledge of Him, or by knowing Scripture, wherein we gleaned the concepts and techniques we are studying. His power gives us all we need for *life*...and for *godliness*. Pretty well covers it. This is why Paul prayed that the Ephesians would "understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe in Him" (Eph. 1:19).

The power of God comes to us in the form of spiritual strength, as we see in Heb. 3:17-19, "The Lord God is my strength," and in Deut. 33:25, "As your days, so shall your strength be." Paul encouraged Timothy, saying, "You, then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 2:1).

This power sustained many in the early church, most notably the apostles and prophets. Acts 6:8 shows us this about Stephen, "Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people." Acts 4:32 reports, "With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all." The apostles needed power and grace to kick-start Christianity. They received "much grace", and so can we.

**Messages from Paul on the Availability of Grace and Power.** Grace and power are available to us. This is the headline of Paul's message to believers. He was sustained in his ministry by God's grace, which was delivered by God's power. He stated this over and over, as we see in the following declarations from him:



*Studies on Getting Closer to God*

- 1 Cor. 3:10. “By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it....”
- Rom. 15:15-16. “I have written you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus....”
- 2 Cor. 1:12. “We have conducted ourselves in the world...in the holiness and sincerity that are from God...not according to worldly wisdom, but according to God’s grace.”
- 2 Cor. 6:7. “...we use truthfulness, and the presence of God’s power.”
- 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 [Jesus] to serve you.”
- Eph. 3:7. “I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power.”
- 1 Cor. 15:10. “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.”

“Yet not I”. This theme resonates throughout Paul’s writings. Paul tried tirelessly to make us understand how grace works (grace works...and we don’t). Yet the work that grace does through us will leave us exhausted and spent...and very content to see what is no longer a secret: what God can do.

**Maintaining the Flow of Power and Grace.** Using the water-flow analogy again to illustrate the flow of God’s power, we can visualize God’s power as running “down-hill”, or through *open channels*. Unconfessed sin, focus on self, failure to study God’s word, lack of maturity, absence of prayer, not forgiving others, unthankfulness, and so on, will “dam the water” and prevent the operation of power and grace in our lives.

The Bible shows us that one of the most important conditions for the free flow of power and grace is “humility”. We have seen this before...it’s all about acknowledging God as God, fear of the Lord, and God-consciousness, by which we see our weakness contrasted with His great strength.

Isaiah 40:28-31 tells us that God gives power to the weak, and for those who trust God, He will renew their strength. 1 Cor. 1:26-31 gives a lucid depiction of how to open our channels for God’s power to flow. This passage tells us that God is not looking for human superstars or celebrities or brilliant minds...nor is He able to empower those who see *their own power and achievement* as their “god” and “the greatest source of good”. God’s power is effective with those whose lives are lived in the name of Jesus, and not in the impotency of their own name. It is not in *my* name that things get done, but in *His* name. He is my identity. Verse 31b in 1 Cor. 1 states it clearly, “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.” We have nothing within ourselves worth bragging about.

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God said to Paul, in 2 Cor. 12:9, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” This prompted Paul to say, in 2 Cor. 2:10, “I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.” He was open to God’s grace and God’s power. These are available to us if we open ourselves to them. James 4:6 declares the following:

He gives us more grace. That is why the Scripture says, ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ Submit yourselves then to God.

When we submit, we surrender. We surrender because we trust. We trust because we know God’s Word and follow it as the road map for our lives. Submission is humility. And that’s how the game is won. “Be humbled by God’s power so that when the time is right he will honor you” (1 Pet. 5:6).

Whether you are highly intelligent, beautiful, capable, and successful...OR NOT...humility before God is always called for, because our *best* doesn’t even move the needle on His instrument for measuring excellence. We live our lives as “unto the Lord”, of course, always putting our most arduous efforts into any project, and trying at all times to put our best foot forward. But we must know with every breath we take and by every tick of the clock that our only real value comes from God, and that whatever thing *we* do will only count when God’s power and grace are behind it.

When we see God’s power...when we acknowledge Him...and when we see our smallness before Him, we will have a true perspective of our limitations. With God-consciousness present, pride will not have a place. We will be humbled...and then the dam will open, and God’s grace and power will fill us and move us.

## Sin

**Introduction.** Sin is a major topic in our series of studies about getting closer to God. Sin destroys our fellowship with God and cuts off the flow of His power into our lives. Anytime we depart from Him, disobey Him, discredit Him, or ignore Him...we are sinning. Meanwhile, God is...well...God. God will not be ignored for long, because our disregard for Him displeases Him. He wants us to fellowship with Him, which we can do only if our sins are removed through confession (or if we don't sin in the first place...a dubious possibility). The more mature we are, the better practiced we will be at staying in fellowship, so we can focus on Him, keep our eyes on Him, and acknowledge His goodness, grace, and power. Until then, confess like crazy.

God does not tempt us to sin. No sin comes *from Him* or is allowed *near Him*, and we will not sin when we stay *with Him* (in fellowship).

When we look away from God we instantly fall into sin of some sort...sins of the eyes, the tongue, the hands, the feet, the heart, and so on. After all, we're only human. The truth is that when we are most *human*, we are least *divine*. When we remove our gaze from God, we stop the flow of grace and power, and we are left with our own paltry resources. Sin can have free reign over us in that condition.

It is not the object of this study to dissect the universal origins or distinct categories of sin. We will see sin generically, as a condition or attitude of man that displeases God. We shall also not spend much time trying to rank sins by seriousness or "badness", although we do believe that some sins are more repugnant to God than others.

In this study we want to see the effects of sin and look at practices and thought patterns that comprise sin. We want to be able to identify specific sins as well as we can to enable us to know what we need to confess, or what to avoid to begin with. We also want to weave into this study ways in which we can deal with sin.

**Sin Is Bad.** When we are close to God, we have opportunities: to love, to trust, to grow, to understand, to witness, to serve, to rest, etc. When sin is present, problems arise: self-destruction, harm to others, punishment, frustration, unhappiness, fear, isolation from God, relationship difficulties, etc. With God: *production*. With sin: *destruction*. This is why Jesus included the following phrase when He was teaching His disciples to pray: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Sin and all its consequences are bad...something we need to be delivered from, something to be avoided.

**Studying Scripture Is a Good Place to Start Dealing with Sin.** We have seen in previous studies the power of Scripture in the dissolution of sinful thoughts and behavior. We looked at the positive effects of "knowing Jesus" through His Word, and saw that Scripture equips us to live moral lives. In Eph. 1:17, Paul said, "I keep asking that God...may give you the Spirit of Wisdom

and revelation, so that you may know him better.” Scriptures guide us and keep us walking in the light of teachings that show our way (Prov. 6:20-35).

Along the way, we have seen many ways for us to be fortified against sin, all showing how to get close to God, where we can draw on His power to keep us pure. 2 Pet. 1:4 tells us that God left us the following:

...great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires, so make every effort to apply the benefits of these promises [God’s Word] to your life. Then your faith will produce a life of moral excellence.

If you are not finding some way to consistently, profusely study God’s Word, you will be a target for sin. Figure out a way to make Bible *study* the center of your life...whatever it takes. Remember the verse we quoted in our study on the importance of Scripture, Prov. 4:7, which says, “Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom [Bible knowledge]. Though it cost you all you have, get understanding.” And remember, by getting understanding, you will mature and strengthen your faith.

**Jesus’ View of Sin.** We begin our look at sin from the perspective of the Master Himself. Jesus focused our view of sin on its point of origin...the *heart*, or the “earthly” part of our heart, which is our sinful nature. Our sinful nature is wicked and very powerful. It is stronger than our will to do right and is the reason all good things that come from us must happen by God’s power, not our own. Jesus acknowledged the wrongness of overt sin, but said that the *thought* that generated the visible transgression is just as bad. In Matt. 5:21-22, Jesus said this about sin:

You have heard it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca’, is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Jesus made it clear in these verses that sin is more than meets the eye, and that invisible sin is just as egregious as those that are plain to see. Another case of this is seen in Matt. 5:27-28, where Jesus said, “You have heard it said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Sins begin in the dark places of the heart, where no one can see. It is easy to sin, a hair-trigger phenomenon. Sin is almost inevitable, unless you have matured and “walk in the light”.

Jesus confirmed this view of sin in Matt. 15:18-20, when He disclosed the following:

But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart and these make a man ‘unclean’. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man ‘unclean’.

Can't even think about it. Sin slips in with no effort...it starts with seemingly innocuous thoughts, and before we know it we're in over our heads. That is why God must consume our thoughts and fill our beings so sin will be crowded out, or we will be sitting ducks for sin.

**Sins Delineated.** As stated earlier, a main purpose of this study is to get a better concept of the specific acts and thoughts that constitute "sin", so we can confess them and avoid them. There are numerous "lists" of sins in Scripture that delineate the things we should avoid, and we will provide several here.

Prov. 6:16-19 describes seven things that God despises. These are premeditated sins that harm people:

1. Haughty eyes—Proud look and demeanor.
2. Lying tongue—Lies are the opposite of truth, the friend of evil, and a tool of Satan.
3. Hands that shed innocent blood—Murder.
4. Heart that devises wicked schemes—Premeditated sins against humanity.
5. Feet that are quick to rush to evil—Addictions of all kinds.
6. False witness who pours out lies—Hateful attempts to assassinate character.
7. Man who stirs up dissension among brothers—Evil efforts to divide or split or break apart fruitful unions.

The sins that hurt people seem to be the worst.

1 Cor. 6:9-10 shows us types of *people* that are "wicked" in the following list:

1. The sexually immoral (commit adultery and fornication).
2. Idolaters (worship outside of God or make anything more important than God).
3. Adulterers (players, cheaters, swingers, and prostitutes).
4. Male prostitutes.
5. Homosexual offenders (yes, part of the wicked).
6. Thieves (taking what someone else has earned).
7. Greedy (preoccupied with acquiring money, property, or things).
8. Slanderers (con artists, deceitful in business practices).

Look this preceding list over carefully. The idea is to see the sins *you* commit so you can confess them. Take your time....

Sins come from the flesh, or the sinful nature. At this point, we want to look at some of the "fruits" of the flesh. For this we turn to Gal. 5:19-21. Verse 19 says, "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious." Here are the ones cited in this passage, grouped by type:

1. Sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery.
2. Idolatry and witchcraft.
3. Hatred, discord, jealousy.
4. Drunkenness, orgies, and the like.

The sins in these groups, emanating from the sinful nature, will snare most of us at one time or another.

Col. 3:5-10 adds even more of these “products” of the “earthly nature”. This passage calls for us, in v. 5, to “Put to death, therefore, whatever [sins] belongs to your earthly nature,” and follows with this list to show what these are:

1. Sexual immorality.
2. Impurity (dirty thoughts or actions).
3. Lust (looking and wanting).
4. Evil desires (imagining and wanting).
5. Greed (idolatry with wanting).
6. Anger (of the sinful type).
7. Rage (screaming or destroying things or people in an emotional fit).
8. Malice (hatred).
9. Slander (destroying reputations).
10. Filthy language (forbidden or offensive words).
11. Lying (words must match the truth).

What we need now is the strength of the Holy Spirit to fight these sins.

Eph. 5:3-4 echoes these charges to live cleanly, citing some of the same sins we see in the lists above. These verses say the following:

But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk, or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.

The sins in verse 3 are serious; the ones in v. 4 are less so. But they are still sins. How easy it is for a group of guys to lapse into locker-room humor and amuse themselves with bawdy references. Note the words in verse 3, “must not”. When you’re confessing your sins, or trying to bring your Christian practice to a higher and holier level, don’t overlook the “minor” sins. They can puncture a moral tire and pull you off the road to maturity in a heart-beat. Minor sins can put you out of fellowship the same as “big” ones. That’s why we’re “sweeping in the corners” looking for sin.

**Sins That Are Not Listed.** There are other lists of sins in the Bible, of course, but the ones shown above are sufficiently representative for us to get the point. What is more obscure are those sins that are not “listed”. These are sins that are *implied* in the Scripture, and the Bible is packed with them. There are a myriad of acts or thoughts that displease God that are not enunciated as “sin”. To discern these *sins*, we have to look for “principles” that let us deduce how we should live and behave. If we violate a principle, we will be into sin, out of fellowship, controlled by the sinful nature, and walking in darkness, just as quickly as we would be if we committed one or more of the sins in the lists we saw above. Here are some examples of verses that “imply” correct behaviors:

- “Make the most of every opportunity” (Col. 4:5b).

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- “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs” (Eph. 4:29).
- “...everything not from faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23b).
- “It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall” (Rom. 14:21).
- “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus...” (Col. 3:17).

Some of the requirements in Scripture are more definite, but are still not mentioned as sin. A prominent example is the command to love, seen in Matt. 22:37-38:

‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

Failing to love God and man falls in the “uncatalogued” category of sin. But NOT LOVING is a sin. Anytime something is required in Scripture, and you don’t do it, or prohibited in Scripture, and you do it...you are sinning.

**Sin Has Allies.** Sin is tricky, then, often subtle and interminably sneaky. And sin has friends. Not just the sinful nature, but also the world and the devil (with all his billions of fallen angels to help him). The world and the devil facilitate sin, and the sinful nature is happy to have the company. We will see more about the sinful nature as we move along, but first we want to briefly pull from two previous studies we did, one on the world and the other on Satan.

**The World Is an Ally of Sin.** In our study on the world, we saw how the world entices us to sin. The aim of the world is to suck us in and make us card-carrying club members of the “world” community. The world wants to “befriend” us. But James 4:4 says, “Friendship with the world is hatred toward God.” 1 Jn 2:15-16, commands the following:

Do not love the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world, the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes, and the boasting what he has and does, comes not from the Father, but from the world.

Cravings and lusts come from the world...and so does pride (boasting). The world hooks us with pride.

Pride is subtle, but egregious. Prov. 16:5 tells us this, “The Lord detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished.” Pride is our attachment to the world. It is a sin with many sponsors and a huge playground, which is the world. Pride is a *big* sin. James 4:6 states, “God opposes the proud.” With pride we get nothing from God but “opposition”. The answer to pride? Humility. Where do we get humility? From fear of the Lord. From study. From fellowship and maturity. The closer we get to God, the easier it is for us to see His greatness, and the more

humble we become. When we are humble we will receive “more grace” to help us choose not to be a friend of the world (Jas. 4:6), and to resist the devil (Jas. 4:7).

**Satan Is an Ally of Sin.** The devil is another strong proponent of sin. He tries to push us in the wrong direction through incorrect information (lies, deception, counterfeiting, etc.). He wants us to sin. In our study on Satan we saw that he is a tempter and a malicious witness against us. He poses as an “angel of light”, yet he is like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. He is a persuasive recruiter for sin, and he is constantly feeding evil desires to our sinful nature. And he has a lot of help, in the form of demons.

Demons are called, in Scripture, evil spirits, deceitful spirits, and unclean spirits, as well as demons. They are behind idolatry in many forms, seeking ways to entice us to sin. It is likely that demons can whisper things to unsuspecting believers. Sometimes we don’t even know where our impulses or abrupt, thoughtless statements come from. The list of suspicious sources for such impetuous behavior is short, and it probably includes demons.

It is possible that demons can also make themselves at home *in us*. Many Bible scholars dispute this, and they may be right. But for the sake of this discussion, we will assume that demons can get into us, and influence us. If this really happens, we should not discount the damage this can do. They are “heavenly beings” with hellish connections; their objective is to destroy us and other believers like us. If they can hang out inside of us...while they are there, they will try to get us to do their dirty work for them. If it is true that demons move into our bodies and set up housekeeping, then they would be reluctant to give up what has become to them familiar surroundings. Matt. 12:43-45 describes this for us:

When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, “I will return to the house I left.” When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation.

Notice what is happening. The demon leaves or is “cast out”, and he looks for a resting place outside of us...but can’t find it. So he comes back “home” (into us) and—if the place is empty—he moves in and brings seven more demons *worse than he is*. By “empty” the verse means “devoid of resistance”...no Bible knowledge, no control of the Holy Spirit, no God-consciousness...the place is empty...y’all come on in, and bring your friends. The sinful nature then has playmates, a pack of demons, and they’re all headed out into the world to wreak havoc, and they’re taking you with them. But your picture will be on the mug shot.

Paul himself may have been taunted by a demon. In 2 Cor. 12:7 Paul said, “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.” It may be that Paul was tormented...*tempted*...by this messenger, or demon, the same way Christ was tempted in the Garden to abandon His mission on the cross. Paul prayed for the “demon” to be removed (v. 8),



but God let it stay with Paul. With the “torment”, however, Paul was given grace and power so that he could become more “perfect” and mature (2 Cor. 12:9).

So demons do their work to aggravate our sin, and the world welcomes all sinners. Satan and his angels are clearly the “enemy”. The world is an iniquitous mine field, and is also our enemy. But these are not the worst. We have discovered the real enemy...and it is us. We are our own worst enemy...and “we” are called “sinful natures”, or the flesh. The enemy is inside of us, and it is deadly.

**The Sinful Nature Is an Ally of Sin.** When you sin (and the specific size and scope of the sin is not important) you are “living in sin”, controlled by the sinful nature, and cut off from fellowship and communion with God. This leaves you spiritually powerless to slow down your sinful nature, resist the devil, and abandon the world. If you can overpower your sinful nature (and, of course, you can’t...only God can, and He *will* only if you do things His way) then you can resist the attacks of Satan and his angels, and share in Christ’s victory over the world.

**Honoring God with Our Bodies.** We are also instructed to “honor God” with our bodies. It is important for us to see the role of our *bodies* in our Christian walk. We frequently see Christianity as a *spiritual* exercise involving unseen parts of ourselves in an unseen spiritual world. But we are talking *body* here. Physical flesh. We are to honor God with these bodies.

We see this in 1 Cor. 6:13b-20:

The body is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. By his power, God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also [at resurrection]. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her body? He who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit...[so] honor God with your body.

This is parroted in Rom. 6:11b-14, in which we see the following:

...count yourselves alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do 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 the law but under grace.

We are under grace. But Paul said he sees another law at work in the “members” of our bodies, a law which is working against us, as we see here:

...waging war against the law of my mind and making me prisoner of the law of sin [sinful nature] at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom. 7:23-25)

The body can be an instrument of righteousness, or a body of death. The difference is found in our allowing our sin natures to control us, as opposed the Holy Spirit.

**Keep Sins Confessed, or Suffer the Consequences.** Jesus Christ can rescue us from these dead bodies, because He eradicated our sins. We claim His work as believers when we confess our sins to God the Father, and this restores us to fellowship. But if we do not confess, God will nudge us back into line through divine discipline. We see this in several passages, as follows:

- Ps. 30:4-5a—“Sing to the Lord, you saints of his; praise his holy name. For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime.”
- 1 Cor. 12:27-32—Eating the Lord’s supper without confession of sins results in discipline.
- Ps 32:1-5—Divine discipline leads to confession and forgiveness...and relief from God’s heavy hand.
- Heb. 12:5-6—God disciplines His children. “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.

**The Art of Confessing.** The initial reason for this study was to see what the sins are, so we can recognize them in ourselves and in our behavior to provide content for our confession. By knowing the sins, we can confess them. By confessing them, we forego God’s displeasure (displeasure leads to discipline). It is also good to learn God’s standards so we can know what He wants. The purpose of “right living” is to increase fellowship with God and to receive His empowerment to do His will. Since our tendency is to “live wrong”, God has provided confession to keep us clean.

While we are learning about ourselves (our sins) and mastering the taxonomy of transgressions, we will confess the sins we are aware of. Sometimes these sins are almost nameless. We say, “Father, I did...whatever-it-is.” We don’t know the name, but 1 Jn. 1:9 says to “name” the sins. As we get better-equipped as “confessors”, we will do this with more sophistication and knowledge. In the meantime, we have to do our best to confess with a sparse set of labels...and—still—all will be forgiven (1 Jn 1:9).

Whenever you know that you have done something *wrong*, even though you have no name for it, *acknowledge* to God that you agree with Him about this “thing” you have done, and admit that you did not honor Him in your action. David said in Ps. 86:4b, “I lift up my soul.” You too can say this. Give your heart to God, give your body to God, and—strange as it sounds—give your sins to God. He will burn them to powder. But sometimes all we can do is lift up our souls to God. If it seems something is not quite right, but you can’t put your finger on it, acknowledge this to God, and He’ll take care of it. You will be forgiven. What you *cannot* do is ignore your behavior. You must confess.

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Acknowledge it and abandon it. If you confess it and then hang on to guilt associated with it, you are refusing God's grace. There is no reason to hold on to your guilt after you have confessed. You must accept God's forgiveness in your life as a believer the same way you did when He saved you. To confess and then not accept the covering made available through the work of Christ is to deny grace and insult God. After you confess, if you hang on to guilt you will become discouraged and will thereby invite the sinful nature to rear its ugly head. When you confess, HAVE CONFIDENCE in God's forgiveness. He is faithful and just. Accept and move on with a light and happy heart, full of thanksgiving to God.

At the same time, the process of confessing, or "agreeing with God about the sin" has a connotation of "stopping" the sin. Confession gets forgiveness for sin, but can never be used as an *excuse* to sin. God hates sin, and as we progress on the pathway to maturity, we will adopt that same view. We will progressively abhor sin. Overcoming sin is a primary objective in our projected growth as believers.

Everything we have studied up to this point is lined up to empower us to do right. We have the victory in Christ. We have His Word, His power. Let Him control you. Open to Him by believing in Him each step of the way. He is waiting to get closer to you, and He will fill you to do His work. Sin will try to stop you, but God is greater than sin, greater than Satan, the demons, the world, and all the sinful natures put together. Stay close to Him, and He will stay close to you. When we get close to God, sin will lose its domination over us.

## **Drawing Near to God**

**Introduction.** In Psalms 73:28, David said, “But as for me, it is good to be near God.” But it is actually better than good. It is greater than great. David said “good”, but meant in his heart all the superlatives for good that have ever been written or even momentarily sensed or felt. To be close to the God Who knows all and is the Absolute Everything is beyond description or imagination. We cannot conceive it or hold it. It seems unlikely that we could even approach Him. But we can...because God asks us to. He *wants* us to draw near, or He would not invite us to move toward Him. He is not repelled by us...He loves us...and did so even before we were saved. But now we are His very own children, and we have family ties with Him by strings of strength and loyalty that no Mafia family can match. We are “made men” forever. And the God of Gods, the true Father of all, makes “the godfather” look like a wimpy little school girl. The protection He gives, the safety He offers, the life He promises goes far beyond the block where we live and extends into all eternity, beyond all space, before and after all time. Yet He is here...right here next to us. Asking us to notice Him, and recognize Who He is, and get closer.

**The Pure in Heart and Those With a Clear Conscience Can Draw Near to God.** James 4:8 says, “Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands you sinners and purify your hearts you double-minded.” If we move toward Him, He will move toward us, and the association with Him will be more satisfying, reassuring, and pleasing than any experience we have ever had. But we have to “purify” our hearts. So that is what we want to see. How can we become pure so we qualify to come close to God? Prov. 20:9 asks, “Who can say, ‘I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin?’” Ps. 24:3b-4a asks a similar question: “Who may stand in his holy place?” And then answers it, “He who has clean hands and a pure heart.” Point well taken. To stand next to God in all His glory and light, we have to be pure.

Hebrews 10:22 gives the whole picture: “...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.” Once again we see the heart, but we now add the “conscience”. In 1 Tim. 1:5, Paul tells Timothy to demand certain things from the believers in Ephesus, and states that the “goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience”. To fulfill the greatest of all commandments, which is to “love God” and “love man”, the love must come from a pure heart AND a clean conscience. Heb. 10:22 says the heart has to be “sincere”, which has fear-of-the-Lord implications, but it must also be “sprinkled” (with blood) to “cleanse” our conscience. The heart is sprinkled, thereby cleansing the conscience. We will discuss “confession sacrifices” later in this study. For now, just know that the blood of Jesus cleanses...in this case, the heart. When the heart is purified, the conscience is cleared. A clean conscience comes from a pure heart.

The conscience and the heart are both under consideration as we examine ways to draw near to God. The heart is the seat of all things good and bad within us. We want it to be pure. The conscience is the part of our inner being that tells us when we do wrong. This is a human trait

brought into the Christian life to help us *know* when we have sinned. The conscience provides a feedback mechanism to alert us when sin is present, much as a smoke alarm calls attention to the presence of fire. Sin and its staining, damaging effects do not originate in the conscience...they just register there. We seem to hear less about the conscience than we do the heart, so we might spend a little time getting to know what the Bible says about the conscience.

**The Conscience Seen in Focus.** The conscience can be “corrupted”. Titus 1:15 cites conditions under which both the mind and the conscience can be corrupted with sin. The conscience can also be seared, as per 1 Tim. 4:2, where the consciences of “hypocritical liars” have been “seared, as with a hot iron.” These people have lost track completely of God’s standards and principles, have lived without a conscience, and have embraced things “taught by demons”. When the conscience is seared, its function is discontinued. It no longer notices or announces sin in the heart. It is not a “good” conscience, as we see in 1 Tim. 1:19, where “fighting the good fight” is done by “holding on to faith and a good conscience”. When the conscience is burned out, the fight with sin is over, and sin has won. It is important to keep the conscience cleared.

1 Pet. 3:16, calls for us to be “keeping a clear conscience”. A clear conscience is achieved in one of two ways: 1) by not sinning, or 2) confessing our sins. We confess our sins to God to keep short accounts with Him, and we grow by studying and believing and obeying Scripture so we can spend more time “not sinning”. This call by Peter to keep a clear conscience goes along with Paul’s statement in Acts 24:16, which says, “I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.” Paul’s conscience looks vertically, at God...and horizontally, at man. He looks vertically at God to be aware of God’s attitude toward his sin, and horizontally at man, to make sure he is not offending weak believers (and, incidentally, to guard against violation of laws and ethics in society). We are most concerned, of course, about our consciences as they relate to God, since the implications reach much further.

Returning to 1 Tim. 1:19, we see that rejection of “faith and a good conscience” can result in faith being “shipwrecked”. Faith and a good conscience are often seen together in scripture, and seem to be closely related. If we do not have faith, it may be because we have unconfessed sins in our hearts, which would reduce fear of the Lord and further dampen our faith. Our faith can even be shipwrecked, which does not mean that we will be eternally lost and destined for hell, but that we will be disabled and stranded until the boat is recovered. Paul was shipwrecked himself, literally, but he did not die. We remain “saved” (we will not become lost or “die”) if our faith is shipwrecked, but we will not be comfortable when it starts sinking. In addition to confession, remember to do the things we learned in previous studies, so that you will grow and your faith will get stronger.

Paul himself said he had a clear conscience. In Hebrews 13:18b, he declared, “We are sure that we have a clear conscience...” Is this because Paul did not sin? Hardly. In Romans 7:23-25, Paul decries his own inability to stay out of sin. He was desperate to stop sinning...but could not do it. So what did he do? He confessed his sins. This made his conscience clear, and he could say he was “sure” of it.

A clear conscience was also important to church leaders in the early church. Deacons were told to “keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience” (1 Tim. 3:9). They had to be mature, fully informed and equipped, and they had to keep their sins confessed to keep the lines open with God. But, as you know, we cannot see inside church leaders or anyone else to see if they have confessed their sins. In 1 Cor. 4:2 Paul said it is “required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.” But in verse 5 he cautioned the Corinthians to “. . .judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts.”

**The Role of the Sinful Nature vs. the Holy Spirit Pertaining to Purity.** The concept of a pure heart and a clean conscience will lead us inevitably into the swamp of the sinful nature, especially as it stands in opposition to the Holy Spirit. In a previous study called “The Holy Spirit vs. the Sinful Nature”, we saw the conflict between these two forces. Galatians 5:19 shows the flesh fighting against the Spirit. When the sinful nature is in control of us, we resist the Holy Spirit and sin proceeds unchecked. The fire or energy of the Spirit is “quenched” when this happens (1 Thess. 5:19). The result is the dampening of the influence of the Holy Spirit, and the freezing of channels carrying power and grace into our lives. Gal. 5:19-21 shows us the fruits of the sinful nature, citing such things as sexual immorality, witchcraft, hatred, envy, rage, drunkenness, orgies, and so on. When we choose these things, prompted by the sinful nature, we are exercising our prerogative to shut down the power of the Holy Spirit within us. When we mature we are stronger to resist sin, but in the meantime, before we have studied and practiced the Word, we will fall easily into sin, and at such times God will no longer be controlling our behavior.

In Eph. 4:25 and following, Paul takes the idea of quenching the Spirit, given to the Thessalonians, and elaborates on it for the Ephesians. He told his students in Ephesus what their demeanor should look like, and what it should not look like. Love and the things that go with it are what should be seen in their lives, and hateful, selfish, sinful behaviors are what they should avoid. In the middle of his point about the two kinds of behavior (good and bad), he interjects a warning about disregarding or refusing the power of the Holy Spirit. In Ephesians 4:30 he admonishes, “. . .do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God. . .” If unconfessed sins exist in the *practice* or *memory* of the believer, the Holy Spirit is grieved. When God is grieved, our fellowship with Him is lost and the fire of His power is cooled within us.

On the other hand, when we confess our sins and stay in God’s Word, believing the promises and truths the Bible gives us, we will exercise fear of the Lord, faith for living, and God-consciousness. Then we will practice the techniques we have learned that enrich our fellowship with Him and empower us for His service. These techniques include prayer, thanksgiving, humility, surrender, offering our bodies to Him, and so on. And then the fruits of the Spirit will be manifest in our lives and we will become “imitators of God” (Eph. 5:1).

In Eph. 5:3-4 Paul points out sins for Christians to stay away from, things that are “improper for God’s people” and are “out of place”. Then in verses 5 and 6 he describes unbelievers who are evil and who are out to trick or deceive believers and weaken their faith in and relationship with God.

Paul warns believers not to be partners with such men, because the wrath of God is coming to them (v. 7). This warning changes to praise and encouragement in verse 8, “For you were once darkness but now are you light in the Lord. Live as children of light.” Paul follows this with a description of the “fruits of the light” or certain “fruits of the Spirit” in verses 9 and 10. Verse 11a continues his message for them to live pure lives with a charge to “have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness.” Stay away from sin, he is telling them. Walk away from it. If you get close to it, you will be sucked in...sin is like a ravenous tornado and it will pull you in, shake you all around, and spit you out, battered and useless.

**Exposing the Deeds of Darkness.** Then in verse 11b of this fifth chapter of Ephesians, Paul says an odd thing: “expose them”. Expose the fruitless deeds of darkness. Expose sins. But then in v. 12, he says we should not even “mention” what the “disobedient”, or sinful people, do in darkness. Expose them, but don’t say anything out loud about them. Now backtrack to verse 8. We saw this, “You are light, so live as children of light...” *Live* as children of light. Don’t have anything to do with “darkness” deeds, but anytime you encounter them or “touch” them...or when you have something to do with them...you will be sinning. You can’t touch sin without sinning. And when this happens, or WHEN YOU SIN, *expose* the sins, your own, not theirs. Confess them! 1 Jn. 1:7 says we should “walk in the light” and that means we should live with our hearts open for God’s inspection. When we walk in the light, we are kept pure, because we are confessing our sins. We are to hold our sins up to the light, as David lifted his soul to God in Ps. 86 to have his sins forgiven. When sin is exposed to the light (Ephesians 5:13), sin becomes visible. Don’t try to hide your sins from God...and don’t try to ignore them. Display them before God, and He will forgive them.

By confessing your sins, you will not be a “sleeper”...or a believer who is not spiritually conscious... (Eph. 5:14), or whose body is “dead” (Rom. 8:10), but you will be “risen from the dead”, and be brought to life spiritually. Then, Christ can “shine on you” and through you, to help you live fruitfully.

Continuing in Ephesians 5, looking at verses 15 through 18, we see the characteristics of life “in the light”, as opposed to “in the darkness”. Life under the control of the sinful nature vs. the Holy Spirit is contrasted once more, as follows:

<b>Bad/Sinful Nature</b>	<b>Good/Holy Spirit</b>
Unwise	Wise
Days are evil	Make most of opportunities
Foolish	Understand God’s will
Drunk with wine	Filled with the Spirit

The final goal of exposing your sins—or confessing them—is to bring the *body* back to life, so it can be offered in God’s service. The body will wake up “spiritually”, when we confess, and we will be filled with the Spirit.

**The Holy Spirit Trumps the Sinful Nature.** In Ephesians 5:19-20 the kinds of things we will do when we are filled with the Spirit are cited. These verses indicate that fear of the Lord and God-consciousness will be seen in the form of praise, worship, and thanksgiving...under the authority of Jesus Christ (in His name). When we are controlled by the sinful nature, we will not be able to acknowledge God, or even pray. We are “dead in the water”.

Our sinful nature has been crucified, “with its passions and desires” (Gal. 5:24). This does not mean that it no longer exists within us. We clearly have a sinful nature within us (Romans 7:23), but believers can participate in the crucifixion, defeat, and disempowerment of that nature by embracing the work of Christ on the cross. Now get this: our sinful nature is DEAD, as far as our *eternal* connection with Christ is concerned, but it is alive and dominating *in time* when we sin. It has no power to destroy our relationship with God, but it can disrupt the flow of God’s grace into our lives.

On the other hand, when the Holy Spirit controls, you WILL NOT SIN. This does not mean you cannot sin...it just means that, until you do sin, the Holy Spirit will only produce righteousness within you. The key to keeping the Holy Spirit in control is to *increase the frequency* of your *returning to fellowship* by confessing, until fellowship is virtually continuous. This is the mark of a mature believer. As you grow in the Word and in faith and fear, you will operate more and more consistently under the control of the Spirit, and that is when your life will become an amazing tool for God’s will and plan...you will see His grace operating in your life and in the life of others as His grace overflows through you.

Galatians 6:7b-9 instructs us to “sow to please the spirit”, because then our actions will increase the dispensation of eternal life. In other words you will bear the fruit of the Spirit and your gift will operate in the church to help believers, which will in turn facilitate the propagation of gospel truth. When the gospel has done its work, people will be saved, and eternal life will be given to them; by this your “harvest” of saved souls will be produced...all because you were following the Holy Spirit.

We are to maintain fellowship with the Spirit. In 2 Cor. 13:14, Paul prayed the following, “May the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” Do you see the importance given to fellowship? Phil. 2:1 emphasizes this again, saying, “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit...” Fellowship is maintained in company with our union with Christ, and the love of God.

Since we are able to live by the Spirit (as per Gal. 5:16), and be controlled by the Spirit in fellowship, “let us keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25). In other words, let’s stay in fellowship



through confession, fear of the Lord, Bible study, and surrender based on faith. It is here that we can avoid sin and walk in love.

1 Thess. 5:12-18 describes things that are done in the Spirit:

- Respect leaders and workers in their positions.
- Live in peace with each other.
- Warn those who are idle.
- Encourage the timid.
- Help the weak.
- Be patient with everyone.
- Don't pay back wrong for wrong.
- Be kind to each other (believers) and to everyone else (unbelievers)
- Be joyful always.
- Pray continually.
- Give thanks in everything.

The Spirit of God produces these things in us.

**Fellowship with God Enables Us to Draw Near.** Fellowship, control of the Spirit, the filling of the Spirit, living in the Spirit: these are all essentially the same. We will be seeing in the future other ways to enhance our walk with the Lord. For now, the main technique we want to master is confession of sins. When sins are confessed, we will be pure, which is a prerequisite for drawing near to God. Confession of sins is central to living right, pleasing God, and getting close to Him. He can have no sinful person near Him.

**Confession in the Old Testament.** We begin this consideration of confession by looking at its usage in the Old Testament. Hebrews 9:7 discusses the use of "confession" sacrifices for Old Testament "believers". Lev. 5:5 describes the sacrifice for confession of sins, as follows:

When anyone is guilty in any of these ways [when anyone sins], he must confess in what way he has sinned and, as a penalty for the sin he has committed, he must bring to the Lord a female lamb or goat from the flock as a sin offering; and the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin.

This sacrifice pictured the way the blood of Christ now covers us in our lives, so that our sins can be forgiven when we confess them to God. Hebrews 9:14 says of this sacrificial ceremony the following:

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death so that we may serve the living God.

The blood of Christ is what makes our confessions effective, because it is the basis for our sins being forgiven. Sins contaminate our hearts and corrupt our consciences. Through Christ and His work, or by Him sanctifying us with His blood, we are squeaky-clean for our appearance before the King. We qualify. The same blood that justified us at salvation now sanctifies us for fellowship with the Holy Spirit. That puts us into the Holy of Holies. Hebrews 10:19-21 sets up verse 22. In verses 19-21, we see that, “We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus...and since we have a great priest over the house of God”...here it is...“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....” The opportunity to draw near to God is made possible because we have the “Great Priest” interceding for us (Heb. 7:25; 1 Jn. 2:1). And our part in making this happen is to confess our sins.

There are many examples of confession of sins from the Age of the Law. We cite a few here:

- Daniel’s confession of sins: Daniel 9:4-19. “I prayed to the Lord and confessed.” Verses 4-19 represent a prayer of confession by Daniel.
- Proverbs on confession of sins: Prov. 28:13. “He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.”
- Old Testament confession of sins: Lev. 26:39-42: “Those of you who are left will waste away in the lands of their enemies because of their sins...But if they will confess their sins...I will remember my covenant with Jacob...and Isaac...and Abraham.”
- Ezra’s confession of sin: Ezra 10:1. Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God. See also Ezra 9:6-15 and Ezra 10:11.
- Israelites confessing sins: Neh. 9:2-3. Israelites spent one-fourth of the day reading the Book of the Law and one fourth in confessing their sins to God and worshiping Him.
- Nehemiah’s confession of sins: Neh. 1:6. “I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s house, have committed against you.”
- Aaron’s sacrifice for confession of sins: “...lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat’s head. He shall send the goat away into the desert...the goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place, and the man shall release it in the desert.”
- David’s confession of sins: Ps. 38:18. “I confess my iniquity; I am troubled by my sin.” See also Ps. 32:1-5. Verse 5 says, “Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord—and you forgave the guilt of

my sin.” And see Psalm 51, where David says, “Create in me a pure heart” (v. 10). He sees this pure heart as a result of confession and forgiveness.

- John the Baptist calls for confession of sins (cited in the New Testament, but this occurred under the covenant of the law): Mark 1:4-5 and Matt. 3:6. John baptized those who came to him in the desert. This baptism did not represent salvation, but a “cleansing” or purification. Water cleansing was a traditional Jewish ceremony. John used it to signify cleansing from sin. John had them confess their sins, and then he depicted this “conscience-cleansing” by washing them with water. He also told them about one who would follow him that would baptize them in the Holy Spirit (by faith, at salvation).

**Confession in the New Testament.** In the New Testament 1 John 1 stands out as the clearest statement of confession as a means for “walking in the light” and staying in fellowship with God. Verse 9 states, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (KJV). Here’s how this stacks up: We, as believers, confess (or name) our sins (the ones we can think of) to God. He (alone) is faithful (stable and consistent), and just (justice is satisfied, based on the work of His Son to cloak us in His righteousness), to forgive us our sins (the ones we name) and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (including the ones that were unintentional, that we just do not know about, or that we forgot).

The converse is also true: If we do not confess our sins, or we confess someone else’s sins, or we confess our sins to someone other than God, then God’s justice will not be satisfied and we will NOT BE FORGIVEN, nor will all the uncleanness in our consciences be scrubbed. We will not be walking in the light or be in fellowship with God. The point? Don’t hide any longer. Confess your sins to God...NOW!

It is interesting the degree to which confession of sins as a way for believers to be forgiven of their sins is downplayed. I am amazed at the commentators and scholars, ministers and evangelists, who do not give confession of sins the weight it deserves, even though they admit that 1 Jn. 1:9 applies to believers, and agree that we should confess our sins. They talk about various ways to “purify” ourselves, such as through prayer or by acts of love or faith. These are valid parts of the Christian walk, but confession must not be omitted as the primary tool for purifying our hearts, for keeping God in control of us, and for enabling us to do the things that will draw us nearer to Him. After confession, every good thing we do will be meaningful.

Of course, confession must be followed by Bible study...EVERY DAY. Otherwise, the inspiration or information you receive on Sunday will fade, as did the “Glory of God” in the tabernacle in the desert. By Tuesday, you will be running low on fuel. The spiritual nutrients that God offers...the meat from His Word, if that is what you were blessed enough to receive...will be processing already, subsiding, and you will become malnourished for the tasks before you. When you become malnourished, you will slow down in confession and prayer and fear and thanksgiving; God-consciousness will become world-consciousness; and divine view-point will become human view-point. And you will headed to the desert.

“Man does not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). If you eat food every day, drink water every day (and you probably do)...you should STUDY every day. And then “be still and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10).

1 Thess. 5:23 tells us that we should be “sanctified” as believers, or cleansed through confession of sins. Spirit, body, and soul will be “blameless” when Jesus returns...or...we will be ashamed at His coming. God is the one Who sanctifies believers...it is not believers who sanctify themselves. Verse 24 says, “The one who calls you [God] is faithful and he will do it.” He will sanctify us and make us blameless. 1 Cor. 1:8-9 reflects this as well, saying, “He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.”

**Summary (Very Important!).** Reviewing, we see in Hebrews 10:19-22 a focus on our being cleansed to allow our hearts to be full of faith (now that we are empty of sin) to qualify us to draw near to God. Here is the rundown:

1. We confess our sins.
2. Our hearts are purified and consciences cleansed.
3. Our faith refocuses so that we can understand God’s Word and surrender to God’s will. This is the faith that *sustains* our fellowship.
4. Growth occurs so that fear of the Lord and God-consciousness can increase.
5. As we mature we draw nearer to God. The more mature we are as believers, the closer we will get to Him.

But if we do not confess and stay in fellowship, and if we do not study His Word, we will never get out of infancy...the play pen will be our home. Nothing pleases Satan more. Babies may leave a trail, but they’ll never make a mark. If you want to grow, begin by confessing your sins. Then the Spirit can go to work.

Pray, but pray in the Spirit. Study, but be taught by the Spirit. Love, but love by the Spirit. Work, but work through the power of the Spirit. Believe, but believe by faith learned from the Spirit. It is a noble thing for a believer to want to draw nearer to God, but you must know, you’ll never get there on your own.

## God's Will

**Introduction.** It seems incongruous for us to use the term “God’s will” casually, as if it were a trivial object...to be accepted or refused at our whim, when God’s will can crush us in an instant. It is the ultimate expression of the Divine Creator...the most certain determinant of all that is, or that is destined to be. It cannot be treated flippantly. But, admittedly, “God’s will” is a paradox. God is God. Why would He concern Himself with what He wants? If He wants it, He gets it. If He wants a thing to “be” or “not to be”, the designated outcome will match what He wants. But He has chosen to give selected organisms in His creation the ability to determine for themselves certain things, such as whether to *follow* His will, or to pursue their own. He gave them *choice*. He alone knows fully why, though it makes sense that He would want His “creatures” to seek Him and love Him by choice, and not just because they are hard-wired to do so.

So here we are...his creatures, with wills of our own...choosing to search for what God wants, so we can follow Him, perchance to please Him, or to become more like Him. God wants us to know Him, so He has given us a Word that contains His will for mankind. He has made it easy...He has shown us what His will for us is; all we have to do is receive, believe, and understand what He has told us. Our intention in this study is to access and assimilate what He has said about what He wants, especially as it relates to our hope to get ever-closer to Him, where we can scoop up mounds of grace and power and faith and peace. So we want to know His will for “people”. In addition, we want to explore the possibility that we can know His will for each of us as a separate “person”.

We begin by looking at what the Bible says about God’s will for the masses, believers and unbelievers. We want to start building a picture of it by seeing instances in scriptures that say plainly, “It is God’s will that...” followed by concrete examples or illustrations. But first things first. If we are to understand and properly revere God’s will, we need to be in fellowship. We want to enter this study with all sins confessed and an awareness that this is the will of the Almighty God that we seek; which means we are on holy ground.

**God’s Will for His Son.** The will of God was at the center of all that Jesus did. When He taught His disciples to pray, as seen in Matt. 6:10, He told them to say to their Heavenly Father, “...your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” He wanted them to *surrender* to the will of God, to fully *trust* Him, knowing that God’s will is based on perfect knowledge and absolute power. Christ surrendered to God’s will when He knew prior to His crucifixion the agony that He was facing. In the Garden, He prayed, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” He didn’t back down, because He was committed to His Father’s will. NOT MY WILL, BUT YOURS BE DONE. This is surrender...faith squared. This is embracing the will of God, whatever it requires and whatever comes with it. Face it, if God makes something happen, it SHOULD happen, and we can only give thanks when it does.

God's perfect will was perfectly done by His Son. He accomplished God's plan completely. Eph. 3:9-11 says that the gospel was at one time a mystery, but it is now becoming known, "according to His eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 11). God's plan to send His Son to redeem mankind is seen repeatedly in the New Testament. In John 6:38, Jesus Himself said, "For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me." Then Jesus disclosed specifics in God's will by saying the following:

And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:39-40).

This means that it is God's will that all who accept Christ as Savior, and are "given to Him" by His Father, will never be lost.

Furthermore, God wants people to be saved, or to accept the work of the Son. God's "plan" is for those who believe to become His children. Hebrews 10:8-10 tells us that we are made holy by the will of God, according to the plan executed by His Son. Matt. 18:14 shows that it is God's will that no one should perish...that all will be saved. It is clearly open to all who believe. God's first order of business with us is to get us into His family by having us accept the work of His Son. The life we have following that acceptance (salvation) is what this entire series of studies is about.

**The Clearly-Enunciated Will of God.** Some aspects of the will of God that we are trying to understand are plainly stated in Scripture and need little explanation, as seen in the following:

- God's Word will accomplish its purpose. Isaiah 55:11 states, "...so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." The Truth will speak for itself.
- Part of our acknowledging God is recognizing the power of His will. David gave an acknowledgement of God with this in mind: "I know that the Lord is great, that our Lord is greater than all Gods" (Ps. 135:5). Then we see further recognition of the power of God's will in Ps. 135:6a, which says, "The Lord does whatever pleases him." Ps. 115:3 echoes this, "Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him."
- God's "will" decides who will be kings or rulers. Nebuchadnezzar learned a tough lesson about God's will: his pride caused him to be removed as king. Dan. 4:30 shows Nebuchadnezzar saying this, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built...by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?" He had forgotten that God places rulers and removes them, as He wills; he was thinking he was king without God's help. Daniel spoke for God, telling Nebuchadnezzar he would be removed as king pending specific events, as seen here: "Seven times [years] will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes" (Dan. 4:32). Incidentally, we can apply this to leaders in the world today, who are in positions of

authority...God put them there. Since God put our leaders in place, we should honor them. They are there because they serve His purposes.

- God's will determines the gifts that will be given to believers. 1 Cor.12:18 says that God distributes spiritual gifts as He chooses. The gifts He gives us are part of His specific will for our individual lives. Knowing our gifts is part of knowing His will for us.
- It is God's will that we give thanks. 1 Thess. 5:18 instructs us to "give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."
- Knowing God's will enables us to ask for things according to what He wants. 1 Jn. 5:14-15 tells us, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him."

So God's will is succinctly stated in many cases, as we see in the passages just given, but sometimes we have to do some digging to get to the real jewels of knowledge on His will. Where's the shovel? We want to know His will, as David expressed in Ps. 40:8, where he shared with God, "I desire to do your will, O my God, your law is within my heart." Bible knowledge causes us to want to know God better and to comprehend His will. So we want to see in Scripture the ways that we can come to know His will.

**Finding God's Will.** One of the ways to find God's will is by praying. David prayed, "Teach me your way, O Lord; and I will walk in your truth" (Ps. 86:11). We can pray that God will provide knowledge of His "way", or His will. Brief reminder: when we pray this, we are asking God to have the Holy Spirit *teach* us His Truth. When we are filled with the Spirit, this will happen. And remember also that the Holy Spirit prays *for* us with words we can't know, because we don't know *what* to pray. He knows God's will, and He can both ask the Father for information about God's will, and reveal that will to us through the Word. Praying is an important step in finding the will of God.

Other examples of praying to know the will of God exist in Scripture. Ps. 25:4-5 records this prayer, "Show me your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths, guide me in your truth and teach me." We see this again in Ps. 143:10, "Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground." In Colossians we see Paul praying for his readers that they would know God's will and receive all the benefits that come from following that will. The following is given in Colossians 1:9-12:

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, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.

This passage is informative, giving us the following:

1. God can fill us with knowledge of His will.
2. We will then *know* His will.
3. This knowledge comes to us in the form of wisdom and understanding.
4. By knowing God's will we can live a life worthy of the Lord, and may please Him in every way.
5. We will then bear fruit and grow even more in knowledge.
6. We will be strengthened with His power.
7. His strength will give us patience and endurance, and will prompt us to give thanks to Him.

There is much to be gained by knowing God's will. A certain level of maturity is called for in this prayer, as it views us possessing a degree of knowledge about God, and envisions our staying in fellowship with Him, acknowledging Him, fearing Him, trusting Him, surrendering to Him, thanking Him, and giving our bodies as sacrifices to Him. When we pray as mature Christians, we will find the will of God.

**Preparing to Do God's Will.** Epaphras, a "servant of Jesus Christ" in Colossus was reported by Paul to have "wrestled in prayer" for the Colossians, asking that they would be given a way to "stand firm in the will of God, mature and fully assured" (Col. 4:12). "Mature" means they were fully armed with Scripture and all it teaches us about getting closer to God. They were also "fully assured", meaning they were totally trusting or full of faith. This is the same as "being sure", as we saw in an earlier study when we looked at Heb. 11:1. It is clear, then, that when we are mature and full of faith, we will be armed to stand firm in God's will.

*Doing* God's will follows fully embracing it by *faith*. To do God's will we have to be *equipped* to do it. That equipment comes from God. In Heb. 13:20-21, Paul prays, as follows:

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus...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.

What I am about to say may seem redundant, but Scripture repeats it, so I will, also: GOD DOES THE WORK. He works in us TO DO HIS WILL. We want to know his will, because that is part of getting closer to Him, but the closer we get, the more we know our inadequacy to DO the things that please Him. He has to do them. We just have to learn how to let Him do what He does...through us. We make it so hard. Why do we persist in our efforts to do "good" on our own, and just keep on being disappointed? Our frustrations are the result of our ignoring the power and grace that are available to us if we can ever learn how to unleash the God-person dwelling within us.



**The Power of Mind-Renewal to Acquaint Us with God's Will.** To learn how to do God's will, we are going to have to go through some mental and spiritual "basic training". We have to have our minds reprogrammed. Romans 12:2 calls on us to do the following:

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.

We are looking for the ability to "test and approve", or ascertain, what God's will is by getting a mental make-over. Then we can determine the "good, pleasing, and perfect will" of God, so we can make decisions based on that will...all the while maintaining the posture that God is the one that will accomplish it, but with the view that we are participants with Him, by His power and grace.

From Romans 12:2 above we get the idea that our minds are not automatically attuned to God's will...they have to be *made new*. The mind is defined by its content, which exists in its natural state as an instrument compelled to please and care only for self, and not for God. New content in the mind gives us an interest in pleasing God...the new content opens us up to knowing and doing His will. And what is the content that replaces false ideas with new ones that are true and reliable? It is the Word of God, which we assimilate through studying in (and by) the Spirit, believing the truths we find. The truth of God's Word over-writes the false information of our former assumptions. When we get correct information, we put on a "new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:24), and we are "made new in the attitude of [our] minds" (Eph. 4:23). Peter told his audience to "prepare your minds for action..." (1 Pet. 1:13) by acquiring truths that "even angels long to look into" (1 Pet. 1:12b). What a privilege it is to have universal truths presented to us that fill our minds with knowledge of the very Being that made us. How can we ever get enough of it?

**The Role of Sanctification in Relation to God's Will.** Part of knowing and doing God's will is accomplished by being "sanctified". 1 Thess. 4:3 says, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified." Paul has addressed the Thessalonians as "brothers". These are believers that need to be sanctified. He has reminded them (1 Thess. 4:1) that he had fully instructed them on "how to live in order to please God". "Living to please God" is then encapsulated in v. 3 as their being "sanctified". So if they are to "live in order to please God", and if they are to do His will, they must be sanctified. This is tricky. "Sanctify" means to be cleansed or to be made holy. Here's the rub: sanctification is used in more than one way in Scripture. We want to look at two of these, as follows:

1. Sanctification is used for our eternal state, since at salvation we are sanctified forever. Heb. 10:14 says, "...hath perfected forever them that are sanctified." This cannot be said of us in time...only in eternity. We are sanctified once regarding our eternal standing with God. Our eternal position is that of being sanctified by the blood of Jesus Christ.
2. Sanctification is also used for our condition in time, which fluctuates from being "sanctified" to "not sanctified", depending on the presence or absence of sin in our hearts and lives. Heb.

9:14 gives us this: “How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!” This is talking about having our consciences cleared, or having our sins forgiven. This happens when we are saved, for sure, but the application we want to see here is that the blood of Christ cleans our consciences when we confess our sins. When we are sanctified in this way, we can truly serve the Lord.

In 1 Thess. 4:3, seen above, which says that God wants us to be sanctified, Paul is referring to the second type of sanctification. It is God’s will for believers to be sanctified, or cleansed. But from what? From sin. And how is this done? By CONFESSION. 1 Jn 1:9 says we are *cleansed* when we confess our sins. Then, as we mature, we will *live out* holy lives, as seen in our thoughts and actions. We will be *holy*, because we are clean.

If we cannot see our way clear to confess, or if we think we can navigate our route through life without God’s Word, He may need to cause us to “suffer” some in order to get our ear. Ever hear the story about the mule and a 2 X 4? (Of course you have.) Maybe God will have to smack us around a little to get our attention. Humorous analogy, but serious point. Sometimes we may need a nudge to get us back on track. He wants us to confess, and then He wants us to study. If we don’t do it on our own, it may be His “will” that we suffer. We will look now at suffering as a part of God’s will, both as a way to encourage confession, and as a way to get us to return to Bible class.

**God May “Will” That We Suffer.** 1 Pet. 4:19 says, “Those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.” Whether the hardship is to get us to confess or to get us back to learning God’s word, or for any other reason, we should “commit” to His will and return always to Him, thus continuing the good that we can do by His power.

The two reasons we have highlighted regarding our suffering—the need to confess and the need to study—do not represent an exhaustive list. We also suffer at times to help us develop our faith. (We will have more on this in future series.) The two causes of suffering of greatest interest to us at this point are, as follows:

1. **We may suffer to get us to confess our sins.** Heb. 12:5-11 gives us the following description of God’s discipline:

And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son. Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons...God disciplines us for our good, that we should share in his holiness.

So why is he giving us this suffering for discipline? We are disciplined so we can share in His holiness...or be sanctified, or forgiven, or made righteous. These are things that are done when we confess. He wants us to repent of our sins (confess them), and return to fellowship. Ezra 10:11 says it plainly, “Now make confession to the Lord, the God of your

fathers, and do his will.” 1 Pet. 3:17 tells us that suffering for discipline is the worst kind, “It is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.” As stated, sometimes we suffer to strengthen our faith or to demonstrate our loyalty to Christ, but suffering because we are sinning and holding that sin within us...well, that’s not good...in fact, it’s the worst! Jeremiah 36:3 gives yet another instance of discipline: “Perhaps when the people of Judah hear about every disaster I plan to inflict on them, each of them will turn from his wicked way [repent; confess]; then I will forgive their wickedness and their sin.” We will never find God’s will if we’re always in “time-out”.

2. **We may suffer to get us to return to our studies and to move us toward maturity through learning God’s Word.** James 1:2 and following tells us that when we fall into trials, perseverance goes to work, and this helps us become “mature and complete, not lacking anything” (v. 4). What is it that we are to persevere in? Look at verse 5: “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all...and it will be given him.” The perseverance is targeted toward getting wisdom, which is obtained through absorbing the Word while we pray for wisdom. So the suffering James is talking about is given to us so we will be reminded to return to study. This is how we mature. Study increases fear of the Lord, faith, and surrender. If all else fails, “Read the directions!” 1 Timothy, chapters 3 and 4, also describe pressures leading to learning, as does 1 Peter, chapter 1. Here are some more:

- Judges 2:20-22 describes God using nations to “test” Israel, to see “whether they will keep the way of the Lord and walk in it as their forefathers did.” “Keep the way” means to learn and recall Scripture. “Walk in it” means to live in the Word, or live *by* the Word. Testing leads to study.
- 2 Cor. 4:8-9 shows Paul saying to the Corinthians, “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.” The relief that this suffering drives them to is found in this same chapter, verse 16, which says this: “...we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” Scripture is renewing their minds, as we saw in Romans 12:2. Suffering leads to study.
- Is. 30:20 says, “Although the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, your teachers will be hidden no more...” This is a word from God telling the Israelites that, even though they would suffer, they would find relief in the form of instruction from the Word, given to them by teachers who would no longer be “hidden”. Study makes suffering bearable.

God permits suffering, but not because He enjoys our hardship. The suffering He allows serves His higher purposes and will always work together for our good (Romans 8:28). If we *confess* because of

discipline, or *return to Bible study* to equip us for the exigencies of life, the purposes are good ones, and we have been well-served in our momentary inconvenience.

**Refining Our Search for God's Will.** The search for God's will continues. Ephesians 5 draws us closer to our objective of finding God's will. We must weigh the words of Scripture to extract the value in their meaning. Eph. 5:15-17 says the following:

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise, but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

We are told to live wisely, and we are taught that the opposite of foolishness is “understanding” the will of the Lord. The pathway to knowledge of God's will runs through “wisdom”. We're starting to get the picture, I believe. Knowing His will is about getting wisdom, or knowing and believing His Word. God's Word gives us wisdom about God and His ways, and, as we get wisdom, we move closer to Him. Eph. 5:17 commands us to understand the will of God. Eph. 5:18 declares what this will is, calling on us to be “filled with the Spirit”. It is God's will that His Spirit fill the hearts of believers...that the Spirit takes us over. The Spirit is given to us for life, but He is disengaged when we sin. God wants us to confess, so we can qualify to be filled with His Spirit. Then He can produce His fruit in us.

The two things we have seen repeatedly throughout our studies, then, are seen again: confession and study. These are the primary tools for growth, and if we do these we will become mature at some point. Then we will know the will of God and fulfill the requirements for getting closer to Him. But we're not through, yet. There's more. Could we be saying now that there is something *beyond* getting close to God? Yes. But this puts us into outer space, where, seemingly, no man has gone before. But they have. And so can we.

Paul says of these Ephesians (Eph. 5:8), “...you were once darkness, but now are you light in the lord. Live as children of light...” Then he describes the “fruit of the light” as seen in “goodness, righteousness, and truth”. They are to be filled with the Spirit and become mature so the fruit of the light will be seen as goodness, righteousness, and truth. Each of these “fruits” has significance. “Goodness” is the “good” we do when we are filled with the spirit. “Righteousness” is connected to our eternal state at and after salvation, AND our condition when we are cleansed of all unrighteousness as the result of confession (after confession, righteousness is all that is left). “Truth” is, of course, the Word of God, which becomes “fruit of the light” when it is taught to us by the Holy Spirit.

**The Advanced Search.** Paul wanted them to make sure all the bases for maturity and fellowship had been covered: they had sins confessed and they were trained in the Bible (the ways of the Lord). Then the “fruit of the light” could be seen in their lives. Once that was done, he wanted them to do another thing, which actually represents an advanced place in the Christian walk, and that is to “find out what pleases the Lord” (Eph. 5:10). Hang on to the big picture. The first thing he wanted them to do is exhibit the fruit of the light. They could do this because they were

maturing and staying in fellowship. Then He wanted them to “find out what pleases God”. This is their next major step.

In most job descriptions, there is going to be an “as-assigned” category, in which we agree to do whatever the supervisor asks. The details are not written out, but they are required. God has given us a “job description” in His Word. But there are some things in His will that are not written. We have to be fully attuned to God to hear them. This means we must be mature and walking in the Spirit and walking by faith and praying constantly. Only then can we discern God’s specific will for each of us personally.

**Reaching the Top; Finding the Personalized Will of God.** We are in an area now that is almost ethereal and that moves from knowing the general will of God through His Word to knowing His specific, personalized will for each of us. The truths in the Bible give us God’s “standard” will for mankind, and tell us what He expects from believers. But there is a “will” that goes beyond His desire for universal or specialized compliance with His pronounced standards for living, and penetrates into areas of our lives where He plans for each one of us as individuals.

Ephesians 5:17 cites the *standard* will of God, saying, “understand what the will of the Lord is”; while Eph. 5:10 talks about the will of God as it applies to each of us uniquely and personally, stating, “find out what pleases the Lord”. When we know what pleases the Lord, we will start to see the *differentiated* will of God. God’s differentiated will for you is different than it is for me. God has a personalized plan for each one of us...differentiated by gifts, locations, relationships, vocations, and so on. Think what a mess it would be if He wanted all of us to live at the same address, or wanted all of us to marry the same spouse. God has *specific preferences* concerning the details of our lives. If we can find out what these are, we can achieve the greatest good known to mankind, and be closer to God than we ever thought possible.

The Christian life seems to break down into two stages. Stage 1 involves confession of sins, Bible study, prayer, thanksgiving, trusting, fear of the Lord, God-consciousness, surrender, and all those things we have studied so far on how to get closer to God. Once we “get there”, which means we have reached maturity, we will be in a position to move to Stage 2.

In Stage 2, we will be close enough to God that we will be able to discover God’s *differentiated will*. We will be acknowledging God *all the time*. We will see Prov. 3:6 fulfilled: “In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths.” But we cannot do this, or move to Stage 2, until we are ready for it. There is no question that we have learned to acknowledge God, and have practiced it faithfully, but until we are able to do it “in all [our] ways”, we will not be able to see God’s differentiated will. “All our ways” means 100%. We cannot bypass Stage 1 and go directly to Stage 2. We hear the warning: “Don’t try this at home...leave it to the experts.” Stage 2 is for the trained and seasoned. Nonetheless, we can start now *looking* for ways to please Him, even if we only see God’s “differentiated” will from a distance.

The differentiated plan that God has for you is not recorded in the Bible, but it exists for your benefit all the same. God’s special will for you, those things that He wants YOU to do that will

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please Him, will only be known when you have reached a level of maturity that allows you to see them. His plan is recorded for you, as it were, in a book with your name on it. The title of your book is *God's Plan for (Your Name)*. This is your story. This is your life. You are the subject. God is the author. You can forget about this book...ignore it...or you can seek with every breath to reach a level of connection with God that will qualify you to crack the cover and see what's inside.

So the Bible is not God's only book. Ps. 139:16*b* says, "All the days ordained [planned] for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."

**Finish.** When we can trust in God without holding back; when we have consistently absorbed God's Word (discounting our own intelligence and seeing life from God's divine perspective); when we can acknowledge Him completely through fear of the Lord, God-consciousness, thanksgiving, prayer, and surrender, all the while persevering in confession...we will see the complete will of God, and do it. We will have come to the edge of His glory, where we can see His light, and know that God is near. Then we will see Is. 30:21 fulfilled in our lives, "Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it'."

## Being Still

**Introduction.** The road to closeness with God will not end within this envelope we call “time”. It will end when time ends, either in terms of *our* time or the larger extent of time itself. As long as we have time, we have an opportunity to get closer to God...for Him and for ourselves...for the good of the whole world. But along the way, many side-roads entice us and urge us off our main route. Any event, or thought, or feeling, or action that is not directed at—or by—God, takes us away from the straight path. We have considered many ways to stay on the right road. We sincerely want to be closer to God. But we have to follow His roadmap, the one that directs us toward Him. This series of studies has provided a look at that map, and has suggested a route that gives us hope that we will sit next to our Father. We now know the following things....

**Summary of This Series.** We acknowledge God as the goal, the source, the center, and the essence of all that is good. He alone is God, and our entire eternal outlook is based on our realizing that *He Is*. “You alone are God” (Ps. 86:10b), is all we can say. He has given us His truths in the Bible, as a way to nourish our feeble hearts and bring us to greater awareness of His prodigious power. He sent His Son and the Son sent His Spirit. Now God sends His Word to teach us ways to know Him. We live in awareness of Him by staying in His Word, and His word gives greater focus to our awareness.

We are weak and selfish creatures, dominated by a nature that prompts us to ignore God...and to serve and please ourselves. Our nature is sinful, neglectful of God, so God has provided a way for us to have our mistakes cancelled by naming them to God. Christ has given us a line of credit to cover our debts. We did a lump sum withdrawal on this credit when we accepted His justification at salvation, but the line of credit is still open, and we draw on that line when we confess our sins. If we do not confess, or draw on His forgiveness for the sins that we commit, those sins accumulate as uncovered debts, and we will end up spiritually “bankrupt”...our faith will be shipwrecked. The credit Christ offers is unlimited, but we must confess to access it. When we confess our sins, we are forgiven and our debit accounts are cleared. Confession is a central requirement for accessing God’s power and having fellowship with Him. Only by confessing can we stay in fellowship, so we can pray and learn the Word and “live by the Spirit”, rather than “by the sinful nature”. Christ has made this possible.

Jesus Christ is the center of our faith. It is because of Him that we have an everlasting relationship with the Father, victory over sin, and power for righteous and fruitful living. Knowing Jesus, acknowledging Him, sharing in the power of His resurrection: these are the things that produce a life of “goodness” in us (2 Pet. 1:5). Confession and an understanding of Scripture help us to *know Christ*, enabling us to “participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires” (2 Pet. 2:4). Christ has conquered sin and our sinful nature, and when we participate in His divine nature, we share in His victory.

We honor Jesus as believers when we profess that we know He is risen. There is life in His resurrection, and the good news is that *He is alive*. As believers we have His light shining within us; His glory dwells there, the way it dwelled in the tabernacle. When we truly recognize Him within us, we can see His face and draw on His power (2 Cor. 4:6). When sins are confessed and we are being faithful in taking in the Word of God, we can experience the flow of God's power and love through us as we acknowledge Him and fear Him. This *releases* the power of the resurrection. When we *see Jesus* within us, we can become more like Him...or He can be Himself, at home in us.

Fear of the Lord begins at salvation, when we first accept the work that Christ did for us on the cross, and then acknowledge that He rose from the dead and is now alive. We know at that moment that Christ did for us what we could not do for ourselves. He gave us eternal life. The "fear" must continue to grow as we enter life as Christians and begin to live as God's children. As we grow in faith and understanding, our fear, our reverence, our awe at His image, give us an awareness of His greatness. Then our hearts and minds are filled with a realization of how big God is, and how small we are. When we see God with this clarity, we can say with David, "You [God] are great and do marvelous deeds."

The Holy Spirit is within us, to teach us and motivate us in our Christian walk. When we are in fellowship, His fruits will show in our lives. As we mature through study coupled with faith in His truths, we will be logging more time in fellowship, because we will be confessing consistently and because we will be tapping more regularly into God's power to help us resist sin. But the sinful nature wants us to sin and wars against the Holy Spirit for control of our lives. Our object is to grow stronger as believers, so that our sinful nature, the world, and the devil will not trap us in sin's web. When we are *in* fellowship, the Holy Spirit will control us. When we are *out of* fellowship (because we have sinned), the sinful nature will be in charge, which leads to more sin. Confessing our sins gets them forgiven and restores our fellowship, where we can pray and grow, thus increasing our resistance to Satan, the world, and our own natures.

As we grow, we learn that prayer and thanksgiving are to be done without ceasing, after confessing our sins and forgiving others for any wrongs they have done toward us. We know that God-size love comes from God (1 Jn. 4:7), and this love will be seen *in* us—and *from* us—when we pray all the time and stay close to God, so that He is living and loving *through* us. Love for God, and for His people, and for all of mankind, will be the result of God's original grace and love being expressed through us. The Holy Spirit must be in control for this to happen, so all sins must be confessed...and then we must pray.

The way we grow is by learning and believing Scripture. If we do not understand God's Word, we cannot understand God. Knowing what He says is the gateway to knowing Who He is. We access knowledge of Him through instructions from and about Him. When we are infants as believers, we fall victim to every goofy idea that comes along. When we study the Bible in a meaningful, qualitative way, and learn the precepts of God, we learn to distinguish and avoid false teachings, unfruitful practices, and the dark deeds of sin and self-absorption. As we mature, we become more God-like, because we are emptying ourselves as He fills us, to generate in us...His likeness.



## *Studies on Getting Closer to God*

A note here on studying the Bible. It almost goes without saying that God has made instruction in the Word available through a variety of media: books of all kinds, CD's, DVD's, television ministries, Christian Bible schools, and—of course—churches. When you select a source for study, be sure that you have a provider of instruction that believes the God-breathed Word, and presents explanations of God's principles clearly and reliably, supported by Scripture itself. The Bible must be taught, and understood, scripture by scripture, and by comparing each passage with all others dealing with concepts being examined. Translations of Scripture that most authentically reflect the original languages of the Bible must also be used, by both teachers and students of the Word. Test whatever you hear as "truth" by looking into the Word itself. Pray that teachers will be made available to you. You will find them.

As we study the Word and as we mature, faith grows. Trust increases. We see results in ourselves and in the world around us. As faith strengthens, we learn to surrender to God's will, and can pray in earnest, "Your will be done." This is a place of rest where we can relax, knowing that He has promised to take care of us and to fulfill His purposes through us, because we believe in Him. We fear Him, trust Him, and surrender to Him, because He is God, and because He loves us.

As we master Scripture and the techniques God has provided for getting closer to Him, His grace and His power begin to operate inside of us and in the environment and human circles that surround us. There is no substitute for God's power. Imitators are not welcome. When the Bible tells us to be "imitators of God" (Eph. 5:1), it is only in association with the filling of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18) that this can be done. When we "understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe in Him" (Eph. 1:19), and acknowledge it, we can be formed in His likeness, by His grace. And for any good that comes from us, we know that it comes from that grace, and not from us (1 Cor. 15:10). If we think *we* can do it, we are doing what God hates most...being proud.

Pride is the opponent of faith. Pride keeps us from acknowledging God, and hinders the flow of God's power. Pride also invites the world and Satan to come out to play...this is just what they're waiting for. "God opposes the proud, and gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6). When we are too proud to confess our sins or acknowledge God or admit our weakness, we will not see grace or power at work in our lives. But by being humble, we open the flood-gates of grace.

Nearer and nearer we move toward God, loving Him, loving people, being filled with the Holy Spirit, acknowledging Him, fearing Him, trusting Him, thanking Him, praying to Him, and confessing all our sins to Him. We are becoming wise, fully acquainted with God's ways, completely God-conscious, absorbed and pre-occupied with Him, submitting our bodies to Him, lifting up our souls to Him, and waiting on Him. We are close enough now to have learned His standard will for mankind and we are tuned in to Him so we can hear His differentiated will for each of us. We are ready to do what He asks. We know the plan and we are on the move, marching forward under His banner. We know the battle is the Lord's; we are armed with His weapons and defenses; and we know that all of evil and Satan and the flesh and the world will have to bow before His power. And we will be right there with Him...on the winning team.

The work is done. We were told that when we started out: “It is finished.” We are now invited to rest...to do nothing. We are told to have faith. Faith is “not doing”; faith is “God doing”. We have learned this and many other things. To help us encapsulate these things, we have made a checklist...a to-do list for believers. Here it is:

### **Maturity Checklist**

- |  |                          |
|--|--------------------------|
| Confessing sins  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Studying Scripture daily   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Praying continually  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Giving thanks for everything                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Acknowledging God  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Fearing the Lord   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Being led by the Spirit (by not sinning/confessing when we do sin) | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Being conscious of God   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Trusting God and His promises; having faith in His power           | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Surrendering to God’s will   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Submitting the body to God’s service                               | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Learning God’s will for mankind and His children                   | <input type="checkbox"/> |

If you are doing these things, you will see fruit in your life, the product of God working in you to do His will. You will be learning patience and love. You will be trusting God and daily acknowledging how beyond-the-universe, outside-of-time great He is. You will know God's will. You will be full of fear toward Him, but you will not be afraid. You will be living in the Spirit as the Spirit lives through you.

**When we Arrive.** So what now? Well, first of all, we can't stop. We must keep going. Believers never "retire", no matter the level of maturity. But that doesn't mean they keep "working". Ps. 46:10 says, "Be still, and know that I am God." Being still means *not working*, especially with your hands. When we know this, we will be coming to understand that God is God...and we are not. It is amazing what will get done when we are "still". (By the way, this does *not* mean you shouldn't go to work at your job. Go there, be on time, and complete your work "as unto the Lord".)

It is interesting what God wants us to do while we are being still, which is this: "know that I am God". When we substitute His work, His will, His way for our own, we are left "being still", because we are coming to do...what?...KNOW. We have studied and learned and believed, and now we are starting to know Who God is. We have acknowledged Him. We have feared Him. We have been conscious of Him. Now we can be still...and *know Him*...know that He is God. This is our strongest recognition... "knowing" that He is God. This is firm. We no longer just believe. We KNOW.

There is an implication here that we don't want to miss. What is our status when we finally reach the pinnacle of God-awareness? It is being still. We will never truly "know God as God" until we have achieved "stillness". This is a graduated level of faith and fear and surrendering.

**What It Means to "Be Still".** There are words in the Bible that go along with the term "still". By examining several of them, perhaps we can discover more fully what it means to *be still*.

1. "Being still" implies "knowing", which suggests some sort of "thought" process. We can stop moving around, but we can virtually never stop thinking. The *best* thinking is that which helps us know God. 2 Cor. 10:5 says, "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." This says that all thinking should correspond with knowledge of God and every thought should be subordinate to Jesus Christ. To know God, you have to *think about* Him. By the time we reach maturity, we have been "transformed"...our minds "renewed"...so our thoughts *know* that God is God.
2. "Being still" implies peace. There is peace near God, and from God. Phil. 4:4-7 gives us the following:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 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.

When we have reached a high level of maturity, and fulfill all the items on our checklist, we will experience the “peace of God” that cannot be comprehended or described. At this point in our progression toward God—getting closer—the peace He gives to us leaves us stunned and speechless. 2 Pet. 1:2 says, “Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.” Through knowing God, grace and peace are abundant.

3. “Being still” implies waiting. Ps. 130:5 proclaims, “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope.” We trust in God’s Word, our knowledge of Him, and so we can wait in confidence. We know the moves are His, so we wait on Him. We can, “Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him” (Ps. 37:7), and say, “In the morning, O Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation” (Ps. 5:3).
4. “Being still” implies rest. Matt. 11:28-29 shows us this rest, as follows:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

He did not say he would give us a job to do or a project to complete; He said He would give us “rest”. Someone who is ready to go to work may be disappointed to discover that the ultimate Christian experience leads to *rest*. This rest is found in faith and maturity. Heb. 4:1 says, “Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.” This is the rest that comes from faith: “Now we who [keep on believing] do enter that rest” (Heb. 4:3). When we rest, we stop working, which is clearly stated in Heb. 4:9-10, “There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.” God’s wonderful rest is open to us. And with this rest, much work gets done, and—as it is being done—we look again and see that we are the ones doing it, instruments of God’s grace and power. He is the hand...we are but a glove.

5. “Being still” implies meditation. Meditation is quiet focus on God. In Ps. 19:14, David said, “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.” David wanted to please God by having right thoughts and mental images before Him. He wanted to bring the acknowledgement he had learned...to God...in the form of a dedicated mind, which was emptied of self and filled with God. So—in essence—David presented God with God Himself, as held and revered in David’s mind. David said that when he “remembers God he moans,” and when he “meditates his spirit faints” (Ps. 77:3). No matter how mature we get, whenever we are still and focused...thinking about God, feeling His peace and experiencing His rest, and actually *knowing* Him...*we have no words*. We can only moan. That utterance is true worship. Knowing God is the highest tribute we can give Him. It is our ultimate acknowledgement.

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6. “Being still” implies trust. Trust is allowing God to *do*...stepping back, making room, because He does it better. We cannot trust ourselves; we can trust Him, or, as Paul put it, “...that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God” (2 Cor. 1:9). David assured us, “Blessed are those who put their trust in Him” (Ps. 2:12). Trust is relinquishing. Trust is surrendering. Trust is relaxing our hands, as in the literal meaning of “being still”, to release the work of God...to God...who works.

When we have matured...and when we are still...we will *know*. And what will we know? That God is God. He says, “I AM...*Know that I am God*.” Hosea 6:3 calls us to this: “Let us know the Lord; let us press on to know Him.” When we reach that point, we will know what to do next.

And when we are still, then we can strap it on, because the work is just beginning. Paul said this:

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 them all—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. (1 Cor. 15:10)

## Endnotes

1. *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, p. 824. Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, TN, 2003.
2. *Holman*, p. 824.
3. *Vine's Concise Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 65. Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN, 1999.
4. *Holman*, p. 1321.
5. *Vine's*, p. 378.
6. *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith*, by Wayne Grudem, p. 336. Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1999.
7. *Bible Doctrine*, p. 338.
8. *Holman*, p. 868.
9. *Holman*, p. 1318.
10. *Holman*, p. 678.