

Weakness is Your Greatest Strength!

Enter The Call to Live in the Transformed Life

Eddie Snipes

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Weakness is an Asset

[The Lord] gives power to the weak, And to *those who have* no might He increases strength. **Isaiah 40:29**

From the lowest ashes arises the greatest victory.

Many church teachings have missed the mark in this area. While scripture teaches that we should encourage one another and bear one another's burdens, we often hear words of condemnation and criticism. Those who can't measure up feel unwelcomed from the church. While religious people believe they are ministering like Jesus, the reality is that Jesus was condemned for lifting up the weak. He was condemned for having a relationship with the sinner. Sinners were drawn to Jesus, while the religious elite were repelled from Him.

If we are mirroring Jesus, why are sinners repelled and the religious elite are drawn to our organizations? Why do people hide their weaknesses instead of feeling free to share them and get genuine compassion from the church?

The truth is that God loves to take us in our weaknesses and messed up lives, and raise us up with new life and purpose. Almost every example of a person God uses in the Bible are those who were failures, outsiders, and dishonored among the culture. God loves to take our failures, and raise us into success so that there is no doubt that His Spirit is working in us. People are impacted by the revelation of His love, not by our boasts of success.

No one is amazed when someone is born into success or privilege. The real glory is found in someone with the deck stacked against them, too weak to stand, and no ability to succeed. Then God says, "This is what I can do," and speaks life into our weary soul, and raises beauty from the ashes of despair. In grace, there is no such thing as disadvantaged. There is no such thing as failure. There is no such thing as a cursed life. The greater the barrier, the greater God reveals His glory in us and in our circumstances. The only real challenge is our willingness to trust Him.

Your weaknesses are blessings from God. So are your failures and limitations. I know that may sound odd, but I'd like to help you shift your perspective. The biggest shift needs to be away from self-focus. We must take our eyes off ourselves, our circumstances, abilities, and barriers. It is God who promised to take us out of the mire, and set us high upon the Rock of Christ. He is the one who reaches into the pit and pulls us out, and sets our feet on the path of His purpose. Faith calls us to step into the unknown because He will lead us into the right way – even if we sometimes wander off

course. We step by faith, trusting He is guiding us and will not allow us to get lost, but He must be the focus.

The truth is that God delights in those who trust Him with their failures and weaknesses, and it is He who creates strength from our weakness. Until our self-strength is out of the way, we can't realize the power of God's work in our lives. God will allow circumstances and failures to drive you to the point where you get frustrated enough to stop focusing on your own efforts and look up.

There is a passage in the Bible that is often misunderstood. Have you heard anyone say, "God has promised not to give you more than you can handle?" This comes from 1 Corinthians 10:13 where we are promised that no trial has overtaken you except that which is common...but with the trial He will also make a way of escape that you may be able to patiently endure it." So, is it true that we will never have a trial that is greater than we can handle? Not exactly.

Verse 12 of that same passage states that anyone who thinks they can stand should take heed, or else they will fall.

It's a call to weakness, not to personal endurance. The way of escape is through Him. Often trials, failures, and even our weakness to a particular sin, is a call to cease from human effort. We are called to cast our burdens on Him.¹ We are also called to be strong in the Lord and the power of His might.² Look again at **Isaiah 40:29**

He gives power to the weak, And to *those who have* no might
He increases strength.

Did you notice who this promise is directed toward? It is to those who are weak. God's power is to the weak, and His strength is to those who have no might.

Life will punch you in the gut. Your weaknesses will overcome you. There will be times when circumstances are too strong for you. The way of escape is not through trying hard, and when that doesn't work, try harder. Nor is it through turning from faith and saying the Christian life doesn't work. The way of faith does work, but not through the way we are often taught. The Bible teaches that God's thoughts are not ours, nor is His ways our ways.³ The Bible also says that human wisdom is the opposite of God's, and His ways are foolishness to the world.⁴ Human understanding can't

¹ 1 Peter 5:7

² Ephesians 6:10

³ Isaiah 55:8

⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:20-25

comprehend the things of the Spirit,⁵ therefore, we try to fit our struggles into human thinking.

What is your struggle? Isn't sin based on human weakness? When we blow it, this is an area of weakness that has caused us to fall short. Instead of feeling rejected by God, or dejected in ourselves, take heart from the words of the Apostle Paul, "I will glory in my weaknesses, for when I am weak, the power of God rests upon me." When you fail, this places you in the position of stepping out of human effort, and into the power of the Spirit. God does not reject you. He invites you into His power where you can discover true strength! Let's consider some examples of this truth.

There was a man who knew God had called him to accomplish something great. From a young child, his mother recognized God's purpose, and taught it to him until he left home. Everything was taking shape in his life. He was in an exalted place of great leadership, and his reputation was unquestioned. Everyone honored and respected this great man – until he made a mistake. A terrible mistake.

He saw someone being mistreated, and he stepped in to put a stop to it, and lost his temper. In a moment of irrational judgment, he murdered the man he was opposing. Then he fled from the judgement of the law.

This man was Moses, one of the most notable people in the Old Testament. Everyone knows him for his great leadership as he faced off against Pharaoh, and led God's people out of slavery in Egypt and toward the Promised Land. But it is often overlooked that he was once a murderer in exile in the desert for 40 years.

While he was hiding in the desert, Moses became a wanderer, isolated, and broken. He became a shepherd, serving a man he encountered in the desert, and had very little contact with the outside world.

I imagine he had wondered about the failed plan he once knew God had for him. He blew God's plan, and now he was destined to forever live with the consequences of his actions. He knew God had abandoned him, and without hope or purpose, he resolved himself to leading animals to find areas of grazing in the desert wilderness. After four decades of living in the desert, the calling of God had long been forgotten. Forgotten by Moses, but not by God.

God allowed Moses to wander aimlessly for half his life, but in God's perfect timing, this would change.

God did not respond to Moses' actions. Moses responded to God's action. One day a strange sight appeared in the desert. A bush caught fire. As he watched the bush, he noticed it wasn't being

⁵ 1 Corinthians 2:14

consumed by the fire, so he stepped closer to investigate. That is when he encountered the God he thought had abandoned him when he ran from Egypt all those years ago.

God made two things clear to Moses. First, Moses' mistakes did not nullify God's call. Second, Moses was going to accomplish something, not because he was great, but because the God who was calling him was great. Nothing was dependent upon Moses except one thing – walk by faith.

After decades in the wilderness, his communication skills were sadly lacking. He had developed a fear of speaking, so he asked, "How can I stand before Pharaoh? I am slow of speech and tongue?"

God said, "I will be with your mouth and will teach you what to say."

Moses was so lacking in confidence, that he begged God to send someone else. He was so resistant to his call that God said, "I will send Aaron. He can speak well and you can tell him what to say, and Aaron will speak your words for you."

Moses' ministry began with such timidity that he had to whisper to Aaron, and Aaron had to repeat it to others. God gave Moses a crutch until he became confident enough to speak without the crutch. It wasn't long before Moses no longer needed Aaron.

This is an important example for the life of faith today. We can clearly see that our mistakes cannot overthrow the calling of God's purpose. Your sin is not strong enough to overthrow the work of God. And you are that work. The problem we have is that we, like Moses, don't believe in God's calling because we look at our past, our mistakes, our weaknesses, and our lack of qualifications.

Almost every powerful testimony begins with a story of failure. Most inspirational testimonies begin with people committing shameful acts of sin, wandering from God, or even running away from God. God will indeed allow you to wander for years until He knows you are prepared for His visitation. Then He will call you with His words of mercy. For you, this may even be His call for you to emerge from your wandering and receive His purpose.

The truth is that your failure does not equate to God's failure of selecting you to be His minister in this world. In fact, the less qualified you are, the greater God can use you. That is why the Bible says, "Not many mighty men or noble men are called."⁶ When we think of ourselves as good, mighty, or skilled, we will have trouble leaning on God and hearing the words, "I will be the words in your mouth," or "I will be your strength." God doesn't need great men

⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:26

and women. God desires to be the greatness in each man or woman. There isn't room for your greatness and God's. You will operate in one or the other. Those who operate in their own power are limited, but to us who have been broken by life and mistakes, we discover true power. Take to heart the words of **2 Corinthians 12:9-10**

⁹ And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

¹⁰ Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

This was written by the Apostle Paul. He has an interesting story. Paul started off as an enemy of Christianity. Paul was highly educated and in a position of authority. He believed Jesus was a threat to the Jewish religion, and the government of Israel gave him the authority to hunt down Christians and bring them back for trial and execution. He was very sincere in his religious beliefs, but sincerely wrong. He was proud of his position, knowledge of the law, and his own abilities.

Paul was on his way to a city where he knew a church was operating, and he had letters of authority to arrest them and bring them back. But he would have an encounter with God that would change everything. He later testified that he encountered a light brighter than the sun. He was instantly blinded, and Jesus rebuked Paul, but said he was being set aside for a purpose. God was calling Paul to become a minister of the very church he was trying to destroy.

Before Paul could be used for God, he needed to be broken. It began with blindness, which was later removed. Then Paul spent 14 years in the desert. He was isolated from religion and external influences, and God revealed things to Paul that unveiled the full message of the gospel of grace, and he was then used to write two-thirds of the New Testament. It took many years to prepare Paul, and in God's timing, He sent another disciple to find Paul and introduce him to the church, where he would become the most influential missionary the world has ever known. Paul went from being a preacher killer to a preacher. Before that could happen, God had to bring him to a point of weakness until Paul stated, "All that I once valued I now count as trash."

God also used an ongoing physical weakness to overcome Paul's self-confidence. He wrote the above passage as he lamented his weaknesses to God and sought for deliverance. God revealed that it was the weaknesses that were his deliverance. He was

delivered from the prideful power of self so he could experience the unlimited power of God.

Sometimes God allows sin to overtake us so that we stop trying to be good enough for God, and start laying down everything before him, including ourselves and our sins, so we can receive the fullness of His power, life, and righteousness. Don't forget that the Bible says that Jesus became sin for us by taking our sins upon Himself at the cross, so we could become the righteousness of God in Him.

God doesn't want you to become righteous for God. He wants to give you the righteousness OF God. You possess His righteousness, and that is what makes you acceptable to Him. It isn't you, but Him. God doesn't accept you because you became righteous for Him. He accepts you as you *are* so He can make you righteous in Him by faith. By faith, we believe in His righteousness and we are credited with His righteousness apart from anything we have done. Sin cannot push God's righteousness away, and our attempts at becoming good doesn't help God's righteousness along. Goodness has to come from God, or it is merely man trying to replace God's goodness with his own.

Do not believe the lie that your mistakes have destroyed the work of God in you. You may look at where you are and think, how can God replace what I have lost?

Moses was a prince in Egypt. He was second to Pharaoh. He thought his position of glory was what God needed in order to fulfill his calling of leading God's people. But God showed that he did not need Moses' status, position, or even his reputation. God would build the reputation as He wished. God would make the position for Moses. God needs no status. Nor did Moses need any of these things.

What had looked like an utter failure was actually the road God had to take Moses through in order to create a humble man that God could use in mighty ways. God couldn't use the prince, but God could use the lowly wanderer in the wilderness.

Some of us may feel like Moses before God gave His call. Moses felt the calling as a young child, but before that calling could be initiated by God, it would take forty years of humbling. In those forty years, God's calling never changed. The same is true for you.

Romans 11:29 says:

For the gifts and the calling of God *are* irrevocable.

Even if you have wandered far from God, or even if you have fallen hard, this doesn't change God's irrevocable call. God's call may now look different than what you imagined, but God has a way of making the way where there appears to be no way. Like Moses, you may not know where that calling will lead.

God didn't reveal to Moses all the great things he would do. The call was to take one step of faith, "Go and speak." Moses wasn't to map out his plans or come up with a great vision for the people. These things would come much later as God revealed them to Moses. To begin the journey of faith was a simple call to go. God didn't allow fear to be Moses' crutch. So he provided Aaron to come beside him until he became God-confident.

The greatest fear that cripples the Christian is the fear of condemnation. The enemy attempts to drive us from God by pointing to our past and failures. But God calls us to look at His strength and trust in His call. That call may be to respond to His invitation to seek Him and discover His unmerited love and grace. The call may be to first believe that He has taken your sins upon Himself, and that you trust in His righteousness.

God will not leave you in the wilderness. Jesus even taught this when He said that the Good Shepherd leaves the flock to seek out the one who wandered away.

The first and greatest act of faith is to believe in His love for you. A love that is based on God's nature – not yours. The Bible says that love covers a multitude of sins,⁷ and that we are established when we know and believe in the love God has for us. His perfect love casts out all fears.⁸ Love does not condemn, for it can keep no record of wrongs. Look at **1 Corinthians 13:5**

[Love] does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. (NIV)

I used the NIV here because it words this verse so eloquently. Some versions translate this into 'love thinks no evil', but this is not as clear. The Greek word translated into 'think'⁹ literally means, 'to calculate, or take into account, or to record'. The word 'love' is the word 'agape', which is the love of God.

Because God's love does not keep records of wrong, He is not focused on your mistakes, but is focused on His purpose to transform you into His image, and to cause you to experience the life of His calling.

You may keep records of your wrongs. People may keep records of your wrongs. Holding on to the past is an act of faithlessness. But God has called you to something better. He is appearing to you along life's journey, calling you to turn aside and hear His call of restoration and purpose. Your weaknesses are not His limitations. Your failures are not His barriers. Everything

⁷ 1 Peter 4:8

⁸ 1 John 4:16-19

⁹ Logizomai - 1) to reckon, count, compute, calculate, count over 1a) to take into account, to make an account of 1a1) metaph. to pass to one's account, to impute

hinges upon one thing – faith. Do you believe enough to step out of the life of your world and into the call of faith and the journey of His calling?

Just as with Moses, critics and skeptics will abound. People scolded Moses by saying, “Who are you to do these things? Who do you think you are?” A life of faith will create skepticism of God’s call and criticism of your shortcomings, but the eyes that stay on Christ will cause you to stay the course. People may focus on your past, but that doesn’t change God’s purpose. The only thing that matters is what God determines for you, and we know that every weakness is an area where God can demonstrate His strength.

Never believe the voice of condemnation. Believe the call of His Spirit, which invites you into the new life of faith. Then be the wise man described in Proverbs – a wise man will fall, but will always get up.

As you learn to walk by faith, falling down will slowly cease, failures will fade, and weaknesses will become irrelevant. Know and believe in His love for you! Believe in the promise that His call for you is irrevocable! Then focus on Christ and begin to walk in faith.

Discussion Questions

Review Isaiah 40:29. What qualifies us to receive the Lord's power and strength?

How does God view our weaknesses? What about our sins?

Read Psalm 32:8-10. How do we discover the paths of life? In verse 9, how does this apply to how God deals with us and our struggles?

Does God expect you to accomplish the Christian walk by keeping the law? Why or why not?

Why did he succeed after returning from exile?

How did Moses' speech problems become an asset?

Review 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

What did God reveal about weaknesses in this passage?

What is the difference between self-confidence and Christ-confidence?

Does God need our reputation, status, or abilities? Why or why not?

If God's love keeps no record of wrong, how does this free us from the bondage of condemnation?

If we are free from the fear of sin, what does this free us to focus upon?

Does past failures affect God's purpose for your life?

How do we overcome our lack of confidence in God's invitation to walk by faith?

Has this chapter helped you? If so, in what way?

The Power of Weakness

When we find ourselves in a position of vulnerability, this is often because God is about to show His power in us, or in our situation. Kindreds of people are forgotten in the timeline of history because they did not trust God when circumstances didn't make sense. Great faith doesn't come from great people. It arises from the everyday people who learn how to take God at His word, in spite of circumstances.

I am going to look at examples of people we would consider giants of the faith. Let's take examples from people in very different walks of life.

Example of Esther

Esther's parents had been killed, and she was raised by her uncle, Mordecai. At this time, the Jews were in captivity to Persia, and the King of Persia had a second in command named Haman. Haman loathed Mordecai because he would not bow before him. In retaliation, he persuaded the king to allow him to eliminate what he called a very troublesome people, who were a threat to the king.

Haman sent out a decree in the king's name giving permission to everyone in the nation to kill any Jew in their providence and plunder their possessions. The people could start preparing, and on the thirteenth of the following month, they could take over the lands and possessions of any Jew they annihilated on that specific day. In preparation, Haman built gallows approximately seventy-five foot high. Haman took great pleasure in the fact he would soon hang Mordecai where everyone could see his victory over his enemy.

Obviously, this caused great distress for Mordecai, and all the Jewish people. Destruction seemed impossible to avoid. By looking at the circumstances, it seemed as though God was distant and uncaring. How could God allow them to be placed in the path of certain death?

What the people could not see was that God had already prepared His salvation before the problem even arose. What appeared hopeless was about to be turned around.

Years earlier, God ordained the events to place Esther, Mordecai's niece, in the king's palace. Esther was the king of Persia's beloved queen, and once the king discovered that the people Haman sought to destroy was his wife and her people, he was enraged at Haman. God foreknew the evil that Haman would plan, and this wicked man did not realize that he was building his own gallows. While he planned to kill Mordecai and take

possession of everything he owned, God had already overthrown this plan by ordaining the right events to protect His people. I recommend reading this story in the book of Esther.

Instead of taking matters out of God's hands, Esther, Mordecai, and all the people turned to the Lord and put their trust in His protection. After testing their faith, God revealed His power to accomplish good in place of the evil.

Haman was taken to be hanged on the gallows he built, and his noble office was given to Mordecai.

What seemed like an impossible situation was not only reversed, but God had prepared the way long before any signs of trouble arose. As people of faith, we also have to understand that God's solution has been built into our lives before trouble even arises. God then calls us to trust in Him over what our physical eyes see.

When you hear God's call to peace, it won't immediately change your circumstances. It will change your perspective. Once you know that God will keep His promise to work all things for our good, then we can face problems in faith and see God resolve the trouble. He may stop the storm, take us through the storm, or help us escape the storm. We don't know what we must face, but we have the assurance that He is with us.

If you read the story of the Exodus, you'll see that God used His power to take the people out of slavery, and then led them to a powerless position. God led them to a peninsula where they were surrounded by water on three sides. Then Pharaoh pursued them with his armies to destroy them. The circumstances were grave and seemed hopeless, but God was about to show them His trustworthiness.

God had prepared a bridge under the surface of the water. No one knew it existed, but God plans our lives from the beginning of creation. When the situation seemed impossible, God's people discovered that God wasn't caught by surprise. He caused an east wind to blow hard enough so that the water was pushed back to reveal the bridge. It became a way of escape for the people, and the path of destruction for those trying to destroy them. When the army pursued the people, God stopped the wind, and the waters returned with enough violent force that not one attacker survived. Fear was washed away when God told them to take a look at their enemies, for after this day, they would see them no more.

Joseph

God revealed to Joseph that he would one day be in a position of authority. He didn't know it, but God would use him to rescue his family from starvation from a coming famine. He was the

youngest, and his father gave him special treatment, so his brother's hated him.

When he had a dream about his family bowing to him, they hated him even more. A day came when his brothers caught him and dropped him into a pit. One said, "Let's kill him and see what will become of his dream."

A band of traders came by, and they decided they would sell him as a slave instead of killing him. They sold him to a prominent Egyptian named Potiphar, and he became his house slave. Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph, but he refused. He did so until she falsely accused him of assault, and Joseph was cast into a dungeon prison.

For many years Joseph watched his life pass by. He was forgotten with no hope of freedom. Unlike modern times, there was no time limit or due process. He stayed until his accuser called him to trial – if he were ever called. Joseph was not.

We don't get to see the details of Joseph's faith, but we can see the evidence from those around him. Until the false accusation, Potiphar saw that whatever Joseph did prospered, so he put him in charge of everything. In the prison, he was faithful enough so that the prison keeper put Joseph in charge of everything. He clearly had a good attitude and walked by faith, likely praying every day for God to rescue him, but rescue never seemed to come.

What Joseph could not see was that God was preparing him for a great work. Through these trials, Joseph transformed from a spoiled child, bragging about his visions of greatness, to a humble prisoner, dependent upon God for everything. The position God had prepared required a man of wisdom and humility – not someone who would avenge himself, or think of himself as a man of power. He was weak and broken, yet hopeful and trusted God.

One day three men were cast into prison with Joseph. They were men in Pharaoh's court and had access to the ruler of Egypt. They each had dreams that God used for Joseph's advantage. They had prophetic dreams about themselves, but they didn't understand them. God gave Joseph understanding of what they meant, and his interpretation came true for each of them. Before they left the prison, Joseph asked them to speak to Pharaoh on his behalf since he was a forgotten prisoner, and had not done anything wrong.

When the men were called back to Pharaoh's court, they forgot about Joseph.

Years later, Pharaoh had a series of nightmares that he believed had a deeper meaning. He wanted someone to interpret it, but no one could give him a satisfactory answer. Then the chief butler, whose dream had been accurately interpreted while in

prison years ago, remembered Joseph and mentioned him to Pharaoh.

Joseph was brought before the ruler and said, “God will give Pharaoh an interpretation.” He then explained that the dream was God’s revelation of the coming famine. They would have seven years of abundance, followed by a devastating drought that would leave the world in famine. Then God’s wisdom poured out of Joseph as he explained how to prepare, and what must be done to preserve life and avoid starvation.

Amazed at his understanding, Pharaoh elevated Joseph to become ruler in the land, second only to himself. In one day, Joseph went from prisoner to ruler. What even makes this more amazing is that Egyptians considered Hebrews (the Jewish people) an abomination. They would not even eat with anyone who was a Jew.¹⁰

Life went from rejection, sorrow, abandonment, and injustice to blessing and honor. Because life was so good now, Joseph named his first son, Manasseh, which means ‘caused to forget’. Joseph said that God had made him forget all his troubles, and the loss of his family. What Joseph did not know at the time was that God was going to reunite him with his lost family.

Many years went by, and the famine became so severe that his family back in Israel were at risk of starvation. In desperation, his brothers journeyed to Egypt to see if they could buy food from the storehouses that they had heard about. They did not recognize Joseph, and when they encountered him, he recognized them.

God had prepared Joseph for this moment. He wasn’t filled with anger or the desire for vengeance. After he revealed who he was, he sent them back to get all their families with the promise that he would nourish and care for them until the famine passed.

They were fearful and expected retaliation, but by this point, Joseph understood that it wasn’t his brothers that created this scenario, but God. Look at **Genesis 45:5**

But now, do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.

Even though Joseph’s life had been filled with sorrow, disappointment, injustice, and hardship, in the end, God’s restoration caused him to forget all his previous sufferings. He gained a new perspective and realized that even though he had been done wrong, ultimately God had control of it all, and was

¹⁰ Genesis 43:32

directing each step to bring him to this point. He no longer looked at the wrongs, but now looked at the work of God.

If Joseph had allowed himself to become bitter at his brothers, Potiphar, or God, he could not have become the man God designed him to be. God would have never elevated a vengeful person to that role. We don't see the whole picture, but there may have been times of bitterness and anger that Joseph had to work through. Perhaps that is why it took so long to get through his trials. But God had a plan to use Joseph to preserve the life of his people. If he had used his authority as a tool to pay back those who had harmed him, he would not be able to be used by God or inherit the greatness of God's promises.

Anger was justified. Getting revenge would have been deserving. But God does not use selfish anger and revenge. He would have just been another wronged person in history whose life was marked by tragedy and injustice. Yet Joseph learned how to put his trust in God and look at life through eyes of faith. Those who wronged him were not the focus. What God was doing is what became the focus. Even though people may try to cause us harm, God will use these enemies to bless us.

The Bible tells us that when our ways please God, He makes even our enemies to be at peace with us.¹¹ Sometimes the way that seems right isn't where God plans to bless us. Often times God has to use our enemies to drive us toward His path designed to fulfill us with His abundant life. The blessed life is often down a path we don't recognize at that moment. Or sometimes what seems like the right way to our human eyes is not the right way. Therefore, God allows obstacles and enemies to arise and force us to change course. At the time, it doesn't make sense, but the Bible gives us the promise of **Romans 8:28**

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to *His* purpose.

This is a call of faith. When life doesn't make sense, we put our eyes on Christ and trust in this promise. Suffering doesn't make sense. The actions of an enemy doesn't make sense. When we lose our reputation or things in life we value, at the time it does not make sense. And sometimes the answers are not visible at that moment. Sometimes the answer won't be revealed for years. However, we are called to walk by faith, not by sight. We can't see where we are going, or where life will lead. We can't see how we will

¹¹ Proverbs 16:7

get out of the dungeon of our circumstances. Sometimes we will lament that it has been years in waiting.

Our human eyes are always tempted to look at the circumstances around us, but God calls us to walk through the valley of struggles as we learn to trust in His leading, protection, and supply.

If there is one truth in life that every Christian needs to understand, it is this. God WILL NOT allow you to miss His purpose when you answer the call of trusting Him. You will be wronged. You will have storms in life that hurt. You will have suffering. Human nature wants to escape the pain and harm those who harm us. We want to retaliate and rejoice when our enemies suffer. Yet the Bible says that not only does vengeance belong to Him,¹² but that if we rejoice when our enemies fall, it displeases God, and He will turn away from putting our enemies in their place.¹³

When we take pleasure in the pain of our enemies, it only proves that we are not yet where God needs us to be. We are still looking at life from the human tit-for-tat perspective. Keep in mind that the Bible says that we do not war according to the flesh, but the true battle is against spiritual enemies. Consider this passage from **Ephesians 6:12**

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual *hosts* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*.

Your enemy is a victim of spiritual warfare and doesn't know that they are under the control of the enemy. Whether God wants you to be an instrument of His salvation for them, or whether He is using enemies to force you in the direction where His blessings will make you forget your troubles, the principle is the same for you. Stand on His promises and trust that God has the power to direct your steps.

Let me reiterate this again. God will not allow you to miss His purpose – regardless of what anyone thinks, says, or does to you. No one can rob you of the blessed life promised by God. They can only rob you for the moment, and then watch God lift you up and glorify His love through you.

The ONLY thing that can prevent you from receiving God's best for you is unbelief. The moment we take anything out of God's hands and handle it ourselves, it is an act of unbelief. When we are

¹² Romans 12:19

¹³ Proverbs 24:17-18

unwilling to forgive and when we surrender ourselves to anger or bitterness, it is an act of unbelief, and we have stepped outside of faith. Taking vengeance is not an act of faith. God's promises are only found by walking by faith.

Yes, your anger is justified. When life seems to go wrong at every level, it is reasonable for you to become bitter and angry at people and God. Injustice may seem to give you the right to be vengeful. You have the right to walk on the path of human wisdom. You have the right to choose the way that seems right to mankind, but the end of that path is death.¹⁴

The majority of people choose to react in human emotion and worldly wisdom. This is why it's so rare to see people rise from the ashes to experience the good God has planned for them. When God doesn't intervene according to our expectations, or we allow the fear of being robbed in this life to become our focus, temptation will always call you to take it out of God's hands and handle it your own way.

When we allow circumstances to draw our focus into the fleshly way of thinking, we will never see what God had been preparing. Instead, we'll begin a shift of focus onto the wrongs that have been done to us. Thanksgiving will be replaced by complaining. But those who walk by faith and not by sight discover the blessed life hidden from the worldly-minded person.

Faith is rarely tried beyond the superficial. There are very few believers, like Joseph, who are willing to trust God through the years of trials, or wait patiently for the salvation of the Lord. When God doesn't act in our timeline, we will always be tempted to turn back to our own understanding.

Faith calls with the promise that whatever is lost is trash compared to the excellence of what God will bring into our lives through Christ. By faith, we understand that we cannot miss God's purpose – even when we don't know the way to get there. It is God who directs our paths.¹⁵

Faith says that His blessings cannot be stolen by any wrong or circumstance. Faith says that no matter what has been lost, God has the power to restore the years that the locusts of this life have eaten.¹⁶ When life seems to consume your hope, possessions, relationships, self-worth, or any other thing we value, God promises to restore in greater abundance so that we also will one day say, "God has made me forget all my troubles."

¹⁴ Proverbs 14:12 and Proverbs 16:25

¹⁵ Proverbs 3:5-6

¹⁶ Joel 2:25

We are all under the promise given to Abraham. The Bible says that after he had endured patiently, he obtained the promise.¹⁷

Faith calls us to be weak in the flesh, knowing that God will plead our cause, fight our battles, and restore anything the enemy can steal. Faithful believers will one day see that what we lose is nothing compared to what we gain. The flesh will always tempt you to use human strength to protect, avenge, or get what we feel we rightly deserve. But God calls us to be weak, so His power can rest upon us. We are called to trust that everything that is robbed will be restored by multiplication.

I know it's hard. When God doesn't seem to be moving, it is very difficult to stay focused on Him. Everything in this life draws our focus. We are like Peter, caught in the storm of life.

The disciples of Jesus were caught in a fierce storm on the Sea of Galilee. They were even in despair for their lives. At the point of exhaustion, Jesus came to them, walking on the sea. Peter called out, "Lord if it is You, bid me to come to you." Jesus said, "Come."

Peter stepped out of the safety of the boat and onto the troubled sea. The storm was still present. The wind was still powerful. The waves that were lashing into the boat were still violent around him, but he looked at Jesus as he stepped onto the water. For a few precious moments, the world around Peter had no power. The water became a firm foundation under his feet, and Peter began walking toward Jesus.

Then his human reasoning took over and Peter looked at the wind and the waves. He became afraid and began to sink. He trusted in the danger instead of focusing on Christ, and he fell into the water as he cried, "Lord, save me!"

Jesus plucked him out of the water and carried him back into the boat. "Peter, why did you doubt?" While he was focused on Christ, this world had no power. Jesus soon stepped into the boat, and immediately they were at the destination they were trying to reach.

Life's circumstances didn't change when Peter believed. He could not change what life was throwing at him, but when he was walking in the Spirit by faith, life wasn't a threat. The only temptation was to take his eyes off Jesus. Once he stopped looking by faith, the power of the storm returned.

This is the call of your faith. Just as when Jesus took the boat to its destination, God always has a destination in mind for you. There were several options for the disciples. One was to turn the ship back toward safety, and never reach the destination. Another

¹⁷ Hebrews 6:13

was to wait in fear, praying for God to stop the storm. And the best option to focus on Christ and step out by faith.

Even though Peter struggled to stay focused, there were eleven other disciples who stayed in the safety of the boat and never experienced what it means to walk in the Spirit. This is where the average Christian spends their lives.

But you are called to be strong in the Lord and the power of His might.¹⁸ You are never called to be strong for the Lord, but in the Lord. This is a call to abandon your own efforts and trust in His power. Your outward circumstances may not change, but your life will. You will experience the promise that God prepares a table for you in the presence of your enemies, and you will overflow with His provisions.¹⁹

This promise reveals that even before our circumstances change, the peace of God reigns in the lives of those who walk by faith. Take a moment to read Psalm 23. God leads us through the evils and threats of this life, satisfies us in the midst of troubles, as He leads us toward His purpose. No power on earth can thwart God's purpose and plan for you. Yet He has given you the power to trust, or turn back. He has given you the ability to trust in His power, or take it upon yourself and struggle with the limitations of human strength.

Take comfort in the promises that God will never allow you to miss His promises and purpose – if you trust in Him fully. Trials strip away self-confidence so we can become Christ-confident. Then no circumstance or wrong can overthrow the purpose of God for you!

¹⁸ Ephesians 6:10

¹⁹ Psalm 23:5

Discussion Questions

Read the following passages

Esther 1:19

Esther 2:17

Esther 2:21-23

Esther 6:1-4

When Mordecai's enemy arose, was God caught by surprise?

How did God handle the plot to destroy Mordecai?

Read Esther 3:13 and 4:1

Could Mordecai see God's prepared plan to rescue his people?

How does this apply to our lives when things appear hopeless?

Read Genesis 37:26-28, Genesis 42:21, and Genesis 45:4-8

What do you think Joseph was feeling when he was sold as a slave?

Were the brothers sinning against Joseph and God when they committed this act upon Joseph?

From Joseph's perspective, was God working in His life for good? Explain.

Read Genesis 41:50-52

Was the pain of what Joseph endured worth the blessed life he received?

Do you think Joseph felt blessed during the years in slavery and then prison?
Was he?

How does the account of Peter walking on the water apply to our walk of faith?

Why does God call us to endure before revealing the blessing of His promise?

Does God want you to overcome and live an abundant life?

What prevents you from experiencing the fullness of God's purpose for you?

God Doesn't Condemn Weakness

The commonly held belief is that God becomes angry when we sin, and demands more holiness than is humanly possible. Recently, I listened to a television preacher, who stated that the bar is set higher for the Christian than it was during the Old Testament days. He said, "The Law says, 'You shall not commit adultery,' but Jesus said, 'If you even look at a woman and lust, you have committed adultery in your heart.' Jesus took the bar of the law, and set it higher. We as Christians are held to a higher standard than the law."²⁰

Thank God that isn't true. The Apostle Peter said, "Why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?"

Peter was speaking to religious leaders who wanted the non-Jewish believers to keep the Old Testament law. When the church was born, it was hard for those who were raised under the law to accept that Jesus fulfilled the law, and called us out of that system. The Bible says, "Those who are led by the Spirit are not under the law."²¹ And the Bible also promises that the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and death,²² which is the Old Testament Law.

Jesus did not raise the bar of the demands of the law. He was showing that even the religious elite of that day were nowhere near keeping the law. They were just as enslaved by sin as those they were condemning. He showed that the law was unattainable, which is what Peter was also saying. If the most godly among the culture built around the law could not keep it, why would God raise the bar even higher?

The purpose of the law was to show us that we can never make ourselves equal to God's standard of righteousness, so that we stopped looking at ourselves, and start looking at the cross, where Jesus destroyed sin and gave us the gift of God's righteousness.

God does not want you to manufacture righteousness by human effort. God wants you to trust in His gift of righteousness, which will push sin out of your life. The more you receive, the more the old sinful ways are crowded out of your life.

The demand of the law is like an instruction to produce light from darkness. Mankind sat in the darkness of sin, trying to find a way to produce light, which was impossible. Then the Bible says

²⁰ Acts 15:10

²¹ Galatians 5:18

²² Romans 8:2-4

that when Jesus came, those who sat in darkness saw a great light.²³

The heart of the problem is that the church doesn't believe God has the power to defeat sin in our lives. When we don't believe, we try to help God by replacing the work of Christ with our own religious efforts, which can never defeat sin.

Sin was defeated on the cross, so in order to experience victory over it, we must rest in the work Jesus completed on our behalf. When we feel overtaken in a sin, the answer is to put our confidence in God's gift of righteousness, believing that He has the power to drive out our personal demons. Let's look at the example of the paralyzed man Jesus healed in Luke 5:18.

A paralyzed man was brought before Jesus. Jesus did not address his physical condition. He looked at the man and said, "Your sins are forgiven."

He was not capable of standing, overcoming, or doing anything to change his condition. Jesus didn't attack the paralysis; He attacked the sin. From there, He instructed the man to rise, take up the bed that once carried him, and carry it away.

That is how God works in our lives. We think our weakness to sin is the problem, but it isn't. The problem was removed when we trusted in Christ. That is where God declared, "Your sins are forgiven." Now you have been freed from the bondage of the past, and you can now walk without limitation. It's time to stop worrying about the sin that He has removed, and start trusting in His call to stand up and walk.

God is not angry at those who can't measure up. He uses our weakness to show that His love is based on who He is, not what we have done. Jesus never condemned sinners. The Bible says that condemnation is to those who love darkness and refuse to come into the light. God wants you to experience the light of His love, and have no fear of His anger.

We look at the weaknesses we struggle with and think that God is angry or disappointed in us because we can't straighten our lives out. The truth is, God doesn't want you to straighten your life out. Let me reiterate this. God does not want you to strive to make yourself perfect before Him. God wants you as you are, and only asks one thing of you – faith – trusting in Him, knowing His grace is sufficient for you.

You see, the sin that hinders you is not really what is ruling your life. You may even be someone who looks at your sin and says, "If I can just get this one thing under control, my Christian walk would be strong." Your weaknesses will continue to rule you until

²³ Matthew 4:16

you adopt this important principle. It is NOT your job to change yourself. It is God who says, “Arise and walk,” once you learn to trust in His love for you, and His will to work on your behalf.

Of course, some foolish behaviors naturally die as we mature; however, character flaws don’t just disappear because we wish for them to be gone. I knew a man who had a very addictive personality. He struggled with drug addictions, and as part of his rehab, he was encouraged to find another habit to fill that void. He then struggled with gambling. Obviously, gambling isn’t a better addiction, but it shows that he wasn’t really changing his character. He was just searching to find something he thought would be less destructive to replace a behavior or addiction he was trying to escape.

The truth is that you can’t change your nature or character. This is the job of the Holy Spirit working within you. The only thing God wants from you is faith.

Religion and theology can be hindrances to the work of God – if they don’t come by the kind of understanding that only is given by the Holy Spirit. The Bible warns that the natural mind (human reasoning) cannot receive the deeper things of God because they can only be discerned, or given understanding, by the Spirit.

The natural mind looks at our sins, recognizes how far we have fallen short of God’s perfection, and assumes God is angry or judging us for not being like Him. Religion based on human thinking teaches that you must get your act together or God will turn His back on you.

This type of teaching and belief system does the opposite of what God intends. It causes people to flee from God out of fear of His wrath, instead of running to Him so He can drive condemnation away from us and cover us with His grace.

The Bible commands us to come boldly (or confidently) before His throne of grace so we can obtain mercy and more grace to help us in our time of need.²⁴ Our time of need is when we have fallen short. Religion teaches that we cannot come before Him until we get right with God first, but the Bible teaches that we are to come before His throne in our time of need, and to do so with confidence.

This is a call to faith. You are to come boldly before His throne because you believe His promise. You need to understand that your sin has no power to drive God away from you; nor can sin drive you away from God. Only your own unbelief can persuade you to run from God.

I’ve used this illustration in a previous book, but it bears mentioning here again. When my daughter was about four, we were

²⁴ Hebrews 4:16

in the yard. She wanted to come outside while I tended to the garden. I saw that a large fire ant mound had emerged, and I planned to get rid of it after I picked the vegetables. I warned her, "Don't get near that mound. Ants will sting you and it will hurt a lot." She looked at it with alarm and nodded her head. As I picked, she shadowed me, but began wandering around to look at the other plants.

A short time later, I heard her crying and running toward me, and I could see fire ants on her foot. She decided to kick the mound, and just as I had warned, the ants attacked her.

Let's put this story on hold for a second and apply it to God. Under the theology I grew up under, the ants would have been sin and the mound was temptation. God warned that there were consequences to sin and that sin will harm me. Of course, I being a creature of weakness, gave in to temptation, and sin was now harming me.

The theology I learned said that when I had sinned, I had to get myself right before God could receive me again. This made the fire ants my problem. Before I could get God to remove the ants – if I could convince Him at all – I had to repent and say I was sorry for kicking the fire ant bed, confess it to Him, then ask him to accept me back, and only then could He receive me again. In the meantime, I could be swallowed up by whatever was attacking me. If it was a repetitive weakness, there could be a time when God might refuse to help me at all.

What a terrible theology.

Would you or I apply this approach to parenting? Would I be a good father if I told my daughter, "No! I told you not to touch that mound, and before you can come back to me, you must confess and ask for my forgiveness. Once you get right with me, I will see about getting the ants off you?"

That would be horrible parenting! The moment I heard her cry, I rushed to meet her, and immediately began wiping the ants off her without any thought of whether I would be stung myself. I took her into the house and nursed her stings. My heart ached at her pain. The moment she cried out, I didn't hesitate to rush to her.

This begs a question. Am I a better father than God is? Will I love my daughter enough to come immediately to her aid, even when she disobeyed, but God is too heartless to do the same for me?

According to the truth of the Bible, God is love, and there is no fear in love. God loves us with such a deep love, that we don't even have a fear of judgment. Look at **1 John 4:16-19**

¹⁶ And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.

¹⁷ Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world.

¹⁸ There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.

¹⁹ We love Him because He first loved us.

This is why we come boldly before the throne of grace – because we know and believe in the love of God. Fear of judgment is gone, and we begin learning how to receive the one thing that perfects us – God’s love. Look also at **Colossians 3:14**

But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection.

What binds us to God’s perfection? It is when we put on His love. By faith, we receive His love, and this is what draws us into perfection. It’s not based on behavior, weakness, or human work.

Let’s go back to the beginning of our discussion. Do we lose favor with God when we struggle with our sins or weaknesses? Are these barriers to God or His love for us?

No! The true barrier is when we don’t believe in His love for us. The change does not happen because we promise God that we will change. God cares nothing about our personal efforts. It is God who makes the changes in us.

God does not want us covered by sin because He is a loving father who does not want to see us harmed. He wants to give us a future and hope. He wants us to experience the abundant life that can only be found in Him. God has no intention of leaving us in failure or sin. He invites us into fellowship with Him, where His love casts out all fear and swallows up every sin with the victory that was already accomplished for us on the cross.

God is the good father who entered the world through Christ, took on the sting of humanity’s sin without any thought for His own pain, and took away the power sin had over us.

Now He only wants one thing from you – faith. Faith in His love and work for you. Let me reiterate this important truth again, “Without faith it is impossible to please God.” It doesn’t say ‘without perfection, or good works, or sinlessness, or theology’. The Bible says ‘without faith we cannot please Him.’

When you feel unworthy and feel like you have disappointed or angered Him, that is the lie of the enemy. Satan tells you that God has rejected you, but God never says that. Religion condemned Jesus for being a friend of sinners. Religion still condemns sinners and still doesn’t believe God loves that deeply and unconditionally.

The truth is that God does not condemn you, no matter what you've done. I can prove it with scripture.

In John chapter 8, religion brought a woman to Jesus who had been caught committing adultery. They took the woman, threw her at Jesus' feet and said, "This woman was caught in adultery. She was caught in the very act! The law says that she must die, but what do You say?" They all gathered rocks to execute her by stoning.

It was an attempt to condemn Jesus with the woman. They knew that Jesus was the friend of sinners, and they wanted the people to look at Jesus as a compromiser and discredit Him as being of God.

Jesus knew that His purpose was to pay for this woman's sin on the cross, but that time had not yet come, so the law of condemnation still stood. The law did indeed condemn her, but the law also condemned every person pointing at the woman. After all, the Bible says that the purpose of the law was to condemn the whole world as guilty before God, which would drive us to Christ where we are rescued from the law and its condemnation.

Since the law condemns, and each person around the woman was also guilty, Jesus did what the law was meant to do – expose sin. He began writing in the dirt. I imagine Jesus writing things like:

Lust = adultery in the heart
Greed = theft
Coveting = idolatry
Hatred = murder

On and on Jesus wrote until the woman's condemners became impatient. They repeated the accusation, "The law says she must die, but what do YOU say?"

Jesus stood up and said, "He who is without sin, let him be the first to cast a stone at her." He knelt down and continued writing their sins in the dirt. Since they wanted to use the law, Jesus forced them to see their own condemnation in the law. One at a time, they dropped their stones and walked away. Even the most religious among them could not escape the conviction of the law.

Then Jesus made this statement in **John 8:10-11**

¹⁰ When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, "Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?"

¹¹ She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more."

The same compassion goes out to you. God does not condemn you. God rescues you from sin. He is the one who empowers us to

go and sin no more. Grace always comes before the call to escape sin.

We'll look at this in the coming chapters. God is the one who takes sin out of us and empowers us to walk above sin's power. The truth is, you don't need to worry about your sin. You need to focus on one thing – Christ and His love for you. When you begin to walk by faith with God, not allowing fear and condemnation to persuade you that God won't receive you, then the transformation will begin.

The hardest part of beginning the real spiritual journey of faith is how we look at our sins. When you believe your sins separate you from God, you have no way to overcome sin, for uniting with Christ is the only way to overcome sin.

Sin indeed separated mankind from God, which is why the Bible calls Jesus, "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the whole world."²⁵

At its core, sin is based on self-centeredness. At its core, love is based on selflessness.

The problem of sin is not the weakness of temptations. The problem of sin is spiritual immaturity. To put this into perspective, look at human development. A baby is born and it has no other focus than its immediate needs. The baby cries when those needs aren't met completely.

As the child learns to communicate, everything is about self. Mine. I want. Why can't I have? This is normal, but a parent helps the child develop socially by teaching empathy and selflessness. This is not an immediate process. A child will not have a healthy development by taking everything away or demanding selflessness. Instead, a parent introduces sharing, giving, learning that sometimes the answer is 'no', and teaching boundaries.

An adult that is completely self-centered is considered immature and childish. However, even the most self-centered child can grow up to be very giving and compassionate.

This is the same way our spiritual maturity occurs. When we come to Christ, we are born as a new creation. We receive a new nature that is of God; however, the flesh is still selfish, and our minds are still focused on self-centeredness. Temptation is still strong because we aren't walking in love, but in 'self'.

God grows us by teaching us how to receive His love, and then how to love others with the love He is pouring into us. Slowly our focus shifts from, 'What will gratify me' to, 'How can I touch someone else with the love I have discovered?'

We begin learning to put on love, which is the bond of perfection. It starts in the easy areas of our life, but over time, we

²⁵ John 1:29

learn to put on love instead of temptation in the hard areas of our lives as well. Then weaknesses begin to fade as spiritual maturity produces healthy ways of thinking and acting.

Young children are constantly drawn away by every distraction, but as they mature, distraction fades and focus develops. A babe in Christ is also drawn away by every temptation at first, but as they mature, each temptation falls away as it becomes incompatible with the maturity level of each believer.

The problem with condemnation-based theology is that it teaches us to hide from God, but maturity can only develop when we are walking with Him.

Sinning is the symptom. It is not the problem. Learning to walk by faith so we can receive the love of God is what grows us into His perfection, then sin will slowly lose its grip. As you grow, your desires will change, and the call of your personal ministry is born out of a desire to share His love with others. Instead of service out of obligation, a desire will emerge, and the call of God will draw you through the desire He has given you.

Don't allow yourself to turn your back on God out of fear, because God will never turn His back on you. Your sin is not a barrier. Unbelief is the only barrier in the Christian life. Know and believe in the love He has for you, and as you learn to trust and walk with God, your weaknesses will become areas where God reveals His strength. God's strength is made perfect in your weaknesses – not in your attempts to make yourself perfect.

Discussion Questions

If your child disobeys, do you push them away or cut off your love?

Is your love greater than God's love?

Will God reject you when you disobey?

Are their consequences to disobedience?

Read 1 John 4:16-19

According to verse 16, how do we abide in God?

Read Colossians 3:14

What is the bond of perfection?

Why are we called to put on love instead of producing love?

Read John 8:3-11.

Why did Jesus not condemn the woman caught in sin?

Did Jesus justify her sin?

Are you condemned by God? And does God justify your sin?

What is the difference between justifying sin and justifying the sinner?

Read 1 Corinthians 13:11.

Is sin a sign of spiritual immaturity?

What happens to these desires as we grow?

Does God reject an immature Christian for being spiritually childish?

How does someone outgrow sin?

The Gift of Perfection

The goal of the Christian life is not for you to become a better person, nor is it for you to do more good deeds. Nor is it a pathway for you to stop sinning or defeat bad habits.

Like everyone else, you are probably struggling to overcome something in your life. You probably have times when you feel like a spiritual failure. Sadly, Christianity is usually taught as though it were mere religion. People are taught to try harder, sin less, and are scolded or shamed when they fall short of the perfect standard they should be living by.

The truth is that you are not commanded to raise up your behavior and strive to be perfect. This misunderstanding arises when the Old Testament is mixed with the New Testament. Mixing the old with the new creates a confusing religious belief system. The Old Testament was designed to prove to man that he can never be good enough to become acceptable to God. The Bible calls the Old Testament law, the ministry of death,²⁶ the ministry of condemnation,²⁷ and the yoke of bondage that even the religious elite could not keep.²⁸

The old law was based on the old covenant that came to an end when it was fulfilled by Christ. You now are in the promise that there is NOW no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. The purpose of faith is not to keep the law, but to walk in the spirit, outside of condemnation.

The truth is that we walk by faith in what has already been given to us through Christ. Faith comes by hearing the word of God. Through this word, we have these amazing gifts from Christ's finished work:

- You are not trying to overcome, you are already an overcomer.²⁹
- You are not trying to be holy, you are already holy.³⁰
- You are not trying to become sanctified, you are already sanctified.³¹

²⁶ 2 Corinthians 3:7

²⁷ 2 Corinthians 3:9

²⁸ Acts 15:10

²⁹ 1 John 4:4

³⁰ Romans 11:16

³¹ 1 Corinthians 6:11

- You are not trying to become perfect, your inner man is already perfected.³²
- You are not trying to escape sin, you have already been made free.³³
- You are not trying to defeat the weaknesses of the flesh, you are given the power over the flesh.³⁴
- You are not trying to be forgiven, you are already forgiven.³⁵

The challenge of the Christian life is not trying to make ourselves righteous for God. It is learning how to walk in what has already been accomplished through Christ and given to us. This is why the Bible says that we walk by faith and not by sight. The victorious Christian life is one that is constantly discovering the depths of what God has given us. We are not looking for condemnation because we failed to do something right. We are learning how to walk outside of condemnation in the perfect life God has created for you and I. Take to heart this amazing passage in **Romans 8:1**

There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.

The problem is that we try to make things conditional that do not have conditions. Even the above passage can be misunderstood if you don't continue reading down to verse 9:

But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.

There is ONE condition, you must be in Christ. Once you enter Christ by faith, you have already entered into His completed work. In Him you are already in the Spirit because your old fleshly nature was put to death and you were born of the Spirit. Once you have entered this new life by faith, you are called more than conquerors. Look at **Romans 8:37**

Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

³² Hebrews 12:23

³³ Romans 6:6-7

³⁴ 2 Corinthians 12:9

³⁵ Colossians 2:13

You are not merely a conqueror, though that would be victorious enough. You are called *more than conquerors!* The above passage goes on to explain that nothing in this life can ever separate us from the love of God.

If this is true, why do we struggle to find victory in this life?

Jesus made the answer to this question clear during His teaching just before He went to the cross. He said, "Without Me, you can do nothing."³⁶ Jesus explained that He is the vine and we are the branches, and unless we abide in Him, we can do nothing. By nothing, He is referring to the life in the Spirit – our eternal life.

Human effort accomplishes nothing in the life of the Christian. Our primary focus is to learn how to abide in Him. Consider this passage from **John 15:7-10**

⁷ "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.

⁸ "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.

⁹ "As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love.

¹⁰ "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.

Religion only focuses on verse 10, not realizing that keeping commandments is not possible without first abiding in Him. Notice, this passage says that keeping Jesus' commandments helps us to 'abide' in His love. It is not 'how' we enter His love. You don't become loved because you do the right things. You are already loved, and temptation is designed to lure you out of an abiding relationship with Christ. Obedience does not make God love you. Obedience is following the leading of God so we remain in a state of abiding, which only occurs when we answer the call of faith.

If we step outside of faith, it does not change God's love for us. It is our decision to step away from the life of abiding in love to pursue something outside of God's plan for us.

The key point Jesus made in this passage is that we focus on abiding in Him. In John 15:5, He uses the illustration of a grape vine. The branches don't work for the vine, but instead they allow the vine to work through them. The main branch of the vine sends life into the branches. It provides nutrients, which causes the branch to grow, leaf, bud, then flower. The flower then produces fruit.

³⁶ John 15:5

What is the branch's role in this process? It only rests in the vine and grows into maturity. Never does a branch grunt, strain, and work to produce a grape. No grape has ever popped out with straining efforts from a vine. It rests, and growth is the natural process of maturity as the life of the branch flows into the vine. The vine is not dependent upon the branch, but the branch is dependent upon the vine.

If a branch is detached, it withers up and dies. No matter how much guilt it feels, it cannot compensate for the lack of connection to the vine. No matter how much work a Christian does, they can never produce anything that belongs to the vine. They can only produce dying works, and nothing produced outside of the vine can be accepted. All we can do is turn back to the vine of Christ where life can again flow into us.

Your call is to abide in the vine of Christ, and when you are plugged into Him, life flows into you, growth is healthy, and your life will be fruitful. God has said that pruning is necessary, for a vinedresser knows that fruit comes from new growth. God will remove the dead ways so that you can grow. It is NEVER punishment, but care. God only removes things that hinder your growth.

Your purpose is not to become what you think God expects from you. Your purpose is to allow God to produce His fruit in you.

You are righteous because God gives you His righteousness, and as you abide, that righteousness flows constantly through you – and that without effort on your part. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says that we become the righteousness of God in Christ. If you already have the righteousness of Christ, what can you produce for Him? All you can do is either abide in Him, or take the corrupt version of human good and try to use it in place of God's perfect righteousness.

You can't strive for perfection, you put on perfection.³⁷

You don't strive to become holy. The Bible says that if the root (or main branch) is holy, so are the branches. See Romans 11:16. You are holy because you are connected to Christ, and if He is holy, so are you.

A lot is taught about sanctification in the church. Sanctification means to be separated from what is profane and set apart for God. According to 1 Corinthians 6:11, you *were* sanctified and justified by God. From this point, there is a process of bringing our flesh under that same sanctification, but this is the body and not the person you are now in Christ. Your inner spirit is sanctified and that is who you are now.

³⁷ Colossians 3:14

You are not even trying to overcome sin. According to 1 John 3:9, your new spirit cannot sin because it has been born of God. 1 John 2 explains that you have already overcome in Christ.

This brings us to the million-dollar question. If this is true, why are so few Christians living as overcomers? If I am holy, righteous, sanctified, and am more than a conqueror, why am I stuck in a pattern of living that seems to reflect the opposite?

The answer is simple. We are taught to have more faith in our personal efforts than in Christ. Church teaching often gives lip service to faith in Christ, but then immediately shifts the focus to what we must do, or not do. The focus is on my efforts instead of His completed work.

Let's look at two contrasts in the scriptures – one is based on the law of effort; the other is based on the work of Christ. First look at **Romans 7:5-6**

⁵ For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death.

⁶ But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not *in* the oldness of the letter.

In the flesh, the law arouses sinful passions. This was true when this passage was written, and it is true today. When you focus on the law, you are taking your eyes off of Christ and are no longer walking by faith. The law can only affect the flesh, and when we enter the law, we are returning to the flesh. The reason is that God delivered us from the law by putting to death our old fleshly nature. That was our old spirit. Our body is still affected by the flesh, and when we place our minds on the oldness of the law, we are again becoming fleshly minded.

The flesh couldn't save us before we were transformed by Christ, so why would we look to it now that we are in Christ. In Galatians chapter 3, the people of the church of Galatia were scolded for turning from faith and back to the law with this warning, "Are you so foolish, having begun in faith, that you now think you can be perfected by the flesh?"

Trying to keep the law was called an act of the flesh. This church was also rebuked by saying, "Who bewitched you that you should no longer obey the truth." Ironically, their disobedience was trying to obey the law. But it was disobedience because God fulfilled the law in Christ, then took it out of the way and nailed it to the

cross.³⁸ It was disobedience because they were rejecting the work of Christ and trying to dig the law up from the grave and live by it. Living by the law is a rejection of the completed work of Christ. And since we have already been warned that “Without Me (Jesus), you can do nothing,” any work that denied Jesus is an act of disobedience in the flesh.

Even if our intentions are good, it is still stirring up the flesh to become our righteousness, which cannot share the throne of our heart with Christ. Once we become our own righteousness, we have separated from the vine and are producing dead works.

Let me also say that even if we turn from Christ, we are not separated from Him. We are separating our works from Him. We can walk in the flesh, even though our spirit is united with Christ. However, when we are not walking by faith, we will not be experiencing the victory that is already ours.

The Bible says that when our minds go back and forth, we become ‘double-minded’. Then we are warned that we will not receive anything from the Lord.

The truth is that God has designed every step of our life to be walked by faith in His perfect will. He will test our faith before leading us to the place where we receive the fullness of His promises. The greatness of our Christian life is only experienced in faith. Faith is always foolishness to the mind drawing its wisdom from the flesh; therefore, the abiding life only finds God’s best when trusting in the leading of the Spirit (which is learned from the word) and resisting the demands of the flesh. And law is a demand.

Let’s now contrast the way of the flesh with the call of the Spirit. Look now at **2 Corinthians 3:18**

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

Chapter three begins with the warning that when someone focuses on the law, a veil is put over their heart. That veil is not removed until someone turns from the law to look to Christ. Then an amazing thing happens!

As we look to Christ, we begin to be transformed into His likeness. His glory becomes our glory as we are transformed by the Spirit within us.

It is God’s job to transform you. The Holy Spirit first calls us to look to Christ, and as we do, we begin seeing His works. Then we are invited to put our trust in His works. Then we receive His works

³⁸ Colossians 2:14, Romans 10:4

by faith, and the Spirit grafts into our outward lives the works that our inner life has received.

The moment our focus turns to the law and what we must do, we enter the flesh, and the works of the flesh are empowered. Yet when we turn our eyes back to Christ, the Spirit gives us what has been promised because we believe. The only limitation to the Christian's life is believing God. Faith is when God reveals His works and invites us to receive them, and we respond by believing in the impossible.

To the human mind, it seems impossible that simply trusting in Christ's righteousness can overcome my active sinful behaviors. Can sin, which has such a stronghold on my mind, be broken and disempowered simply because I believe in what Christ has done? How can I spend my life fighting my demons and losing, yet be delivered simply by looking to Jesus?

These things are so because it is not your work. It is the Spirit who works in you and has the power over the flesh. It is God who promised, "If you walk in the Spirit, you will not fulfill the lust of the flesh." It works because it isn't your power, but Gods. When you look to Jesus and trust in His work, you are taking your sin, and as an act of faith, you are giving it to God. God doesn't want you to present to Him your righteousness. God wants you to present to Him your sins, failures, and weaknesses. When you entrust God with your sins, it is an act of true faith. God then says, "Let Me handle that sin which is bullying you into submission."

Sin doesn't stand a chance. Your weaknesses become strengths because now it is not you upholding your life, but you have given the Spirit the right to work. Sin has no problem forcing you into submission, but God wants a relationship – not dominance. Faith is an act of submitting your life to God because you trust Him to do what you know is greater than what you could ever do. It is saying, "My righteousness is nothing. I give it all to you and receive your righteousness instead."

This is the life of an overcomer. This is why we are more than conquerors. When God is working in us, even our problems become victories. When life gets too hard and our problems too big, we can still rest. We know that God thrives in the impossible. Problems rise up to test our faith, but as we learn to let go, we get to experience life as God intended it to be lived.

Never fall into the trap of thinking that when you fail, God is angry or disappointed in you. God is always working to get you to the point of complete trust. His purpose is for you to live in the Spirit. However, faith can't grow when it is not tested. When we are spiritually babes in Christ, our ability to stand by faith will fail more than it succeeds. But God isn't testing you to see if you are worthy. God tests because you can't grow without it. Just as a child learns

to fall less and less, you will also learn to stand more and fall less as you look to Him after each misstep.

The greater the problem, the greater the promise that rests behind it. Every great promise in the Bible began with the testing of faith. God reveals Himself, strengthens us, calls us to look at Him and not the problems, and then allows this world to test us to teach us how to rest in Him. When you fail, God picks you up and builds you up.

God does not condemn mistakes. He teaches and leads. Always keep in mind that He sees the big picture, but we only see our tiny point of view. What may seem unfair in the moment will prove to be a greater blessing in the end – if we continue to walk by faith. Many times we miss the promise because we turn back to the flesh just before we reach the part of the valley that goes upward. Yet even when we turn back, God has planned our lives in such a way to get us back into His great plan for us.

God built His purpose in our lives when He laid the foundation of creation. Your purpose has already been laid out. God is not figuring this out as He goes. The Bible says that God sees the end from the beginning, and that He put so much thought in our life, that if the thoughts could be counted, it would be more than the sand of the seas.

When you face the hardships of life, God has already planned your good behind every problem, but that good is only discovered through faith. This means we can face the impossible knowing that the door of success is hidden in the struggle. This also means that when your biggest problem is you, that has been planned for as well. Your greatest struggle is not a surprise to God. He has already planned a way to create good from your sins, and He has established His strength to overcome your weakness. Now He calls you to take your focus off the problem and trust fully in Him. Don't give undue glory to your problems. Instead, give them to the Lord and let His glory become your victory.

God delights in glorifying Himself through your weaknesses.

Discussion Questions

Review Romans 8:1 and 8:9.

How does this apply to the believer when they commit sin?

What does it mean to walk in the Spirit?

What does the Bible mean by MORE than conquerors?

Read John 15:3-11.

Are we trying to clean ourselves up for God?

How do we gain a fruitful life?

How do we abide in His love?

If we fail to abide in God's love, does God's love for us change?
Why or why not?

How do you become holy, righteous, and sanctified?

What happens if we try to replace the work of Christ with our own attempts at obedience through keeping the law or using works to earn God's favor?

Why does God test our faith?

How does God respond when we fail a test of faith?

Is life sometimes unfair?

How does faith change this?

The Good News

Toxic relationships do not create healthy people. A toxic relationship is one that drains the life out of one person or the other. It's a relationship where one person demands so much that the other person can't thrive. Our time is spent appeasing the toxic person to avoid outbursts of wrath, words of condemnation, and trying to defuse a critical spirit. Love must be earned in this type of relationship.

Religion has created a toxic relationship for its members through a false image of an angry, demanding, and critical version of God. Religion says that God demands worship, service, and perfect obedience.

This is why most people give up on the legalistic form of Christianity. It's toxic. It demands more than we can give, and when we fall short in any way, the wrath of this religion's god seethes against us, rejects and condemns us, and brings punishment upon us.

Why do we project upon God the worst attributes of humanity? We advise people to escape toxic human relationships, so why do we advise people to submit to a toxic version of God? According to the Bible, God is love. He is not wrath, anger, hatred, or vengeful.

For the first twenty years of my Christian life, I wasted my energy trying to appease an angry God. I tried to force myself into good behavior. I worked hard in church. I forced myself to read a certain amount of scripture each day. After two decades of trying, I found myself mentally exhausted, spiritually weak, and frustrated.

I was in a spiritual toxic relationship with an angry god that does not resemble the God revealed to us in the Bible. Scripture teaches that God is love. The word for love comes from the Greek word, Agape, which means love that is self-giving, self-sacrificing, outward focused love. In 1 Corinthians 13, the Bible explains agape love as: patient and kind, does not parade itself, isn't puffed up or proud, is not rude, does not seek its own, thinks no evil, bears all things, endures all things, keeps no records of wrong, and love never fails.

Is this the God you know? A God whose love never fails, does not seek His own, but seeks the good of you? Does your version of God bear all things, and does not lash out in anger, but endures all things – especially your weaknesses and failures?

The doctrine of God must have its roots in this truth, or it's a false god erected by man's religion.

I didn't know this version of God until late in my Christian walk. No matter how much I gave, it was never enough – even

though love does not demand. My version of God was never satisfied with how much I served, even though the God of the Bible does not seek His own good, but mine. My previous version of God rejected me when I blew it or sinned, but the God of the Bible has love that never fails.

My version of God demanded my love 100% of the time (which is humanly impossible), but the God of scripture gives love 100% of the time. My false view drove me farther away when I fell short, until I discovered that His love in me drew me deeper into fellowship with Him – even when I struggled. My failure ended when I understood that the Christian life was about walking in the light of His love instead of trying to appease a demanding God.

How did we turn the gospel into a message of appeasing God? How did we turn His message of love into a toxic relationship that drowns us in guilt instead of rescuing us from the world of sorrow? The word ‘gospel’ means ‘Good news’. It’s not about our sins and failures. The good news is that “While we were yet sinners, God demonstrated His love by dying for us in order to rescue us from sin,” and then pouring His agape/love into our hearts so we can experience the power of the Holy Spirit within us.³⁹

Let’s take a few moments to look at what the gospel/good news is all about.

³⁹ Romans 5:8

Sin Has Been Removed

The Bible is divided into Old and New Testaments, which are based on the Old and New Covenants. The Old Covenant is based on the law. According to scripture, the law was given to man to reveal to each person that they cannot measure up to God's perfect standard so we can recognize the value of the New Covenant of Christ. The old revealed man's sin so that the new could reveal God's love. Look at **Romans 5:8-10**

⁸ But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

⁹ Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him.

¹⁰ For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.

The law reveals sin, but now God reveals that He loves us even while we were in sin. Nowhere does the Bible say that if we act good enough He will love us. The law is designed to show us that we are born of the flesh. We were born with a nature that is bound to this world and cannot act outside of self-centered motives. Yet to be like God, we would have to be creatures of agape/love with selfless motives. The law proves this to be impossible.

This is why the Old Covenant says, "You must love the Lord your God with ALL your heart, ALL your mind, ALL your soul, and ALL your strength."⁴⁰ Anything short of 100% success is failure and can never put us in a good standing with God. It is an impossible task. No human can love selflessly without a moment's rest.

Yet the New Covenant says, "It's not that we love God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to stand in the place of judgment against our sin."⁴¹

This is where the Bible reveals a great mystery that so many miss. It is not God's judgement against us that Jesus died for. Jesus stood in our place under the law's condemnation. The message that Jesus stands between us and an angry God is a false message. Jesus told His disciples, "The Father Himself loves you."⁴² Jesus also said, "If you have seen Me, you have seen the Father."

How many sinners did Jesus condemn? He never condemned prostitutes, drunkards, thieves, and those members of society that the religious culture rejected. In fact, the church of Jesus' day criticized Jesus for loving sinners. Not once do you see Jesus calling

⁴⁰ Deuteronomy 6:5

⁴¹ 1 John 4:10

⁴²

any sinner ‘a sinner’. However, you do see Jesus condemning those who are religious.

Jesus called the religious elite serpents⁴³, children of the devil,⁴⁴ and hypocrites.⁴⁵ He condemned their religion by saying they go through great lengths to win people over, but make them twice the children of hell as themselves.⁴⁶

Jesus was very hard on religion, and very compassionate on sinners. The only ones Jesus condemned were those trying to create their own righteousness through the law. He made it clear that no one could stand under their own righteousness. When people dumbed down the law to make themselves appear to be righteous, Jesus showed them the full weight of the law, which always dismantles self-righteousness.

This is what the law does. It condemns. The law never rewards. Those who chose to live by the law, were condemned by the law. Those who tried to shape the law into a rule system that they could keep, and then tried to condemn others were called hypocrites, for they were pretending to be right under the law by ignoring what condemned them, and then selecting only the parts of the law that could be used to condemn others. On top of this, they were teaching their religious prospects how to do the same. Anyone who tried to proclaim their own righteousness under the law are actually condemned *by* the law.

This is why the Bible says that under the law every mouth is stopped and all the world becomes guilty before God. This is also why Romans 1 lists sins that condemn everyone, and then Romans 2:1 begins with, “Therefore, you are inexcusable, whoever you are who judges another. For in whatever you judge another, you condemn yourself, for you who judge are guilty of these same things.”

The condemnation of the law is designed to show each person that we are all in the same boat. Not one of us can condemn another person, for we all are guilty of something the law condemns. And the Bible says that if we offend in one point, we are guilty of the whole law. We are either perfect from birth, or we are guilty.

Romans 1 reveals the problem of sin. Romans 2 says we are all in the same condition, even if our symptoms vary. Then Romans 3 tells us that while we were yet sinners, God loved us so much that He demonstrated His love by dying in our place so we could escape the condemnation of the law.

⁴³ Matthew 3:7, Matthew 12:34, Matthew 23:33, Luke 3:7

⁴⁴ John 8:44

⁴⁵ Matthew 23:13,14, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29

⁴⁶ Matthew 23:15

This brings us to the point where all things point to Christ. The gospel, or ‘Good News’, is not that God seethes against your sins and failures, but that God loves you with such a sacrificial love that He demonstrated this love by taking the penalty of sin out of the way. He put Himself under our condemnation, and placed us under His righteousness. **2 Cor. 5:21** puts it this way:

For He made Him (Jesus) who knew no sin *to be* sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

In Christ, you are the righteousness of God. Sin has been removed and buried with Christ because your sin *and* the law were nailed to the cross of Jesus.

The Gospel

The word ‘gospel’ means ‘good news’. It’s often associated with hell, fire, and brimstone preaching, but that isn’t what we see in the Bible. The first proclamation was from the angels, who stated, “Peace on earth, and good will toward man.”

This is the announcement that God was showing favor towards man and making peace between man and his God. Or as John 3:17 states, “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”

In the Old Testament, man was not permitted to approach God because of his sinful nature. The Ark of the Covenant was the picture of God’s holiness, and no one was allowed to enter this holy place. On the cross, Jesus took upon Himself the entirety of sin so there was no barrier between man and God. To show that sin was taken out of the way, God took the holiest place that had been hidden behind the veil of curtains, and tore the curtains from the top (God’s side) down to the earth (man’s side). The holiest place was now open for all to approach God without fear.

According to the Bible, sin entered the world through Adam. In the beginning, God said that if Adam rebelled, he would surely die. Though physical death was a slow process, spiritual death was immediate. And according to the Bible, we inherited that sin nature from Adam, and along with it, the wages of sin which is death.⁴⁷ The curse came through Adam, but that curse was reversed when God took sin and its curse upon Himself.⁴⁸ Your sin was removed in Christ. Look again at **2 Corinthians 5:21**

⁴⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:22, Romans 5:14, Romans 6:23

⁴⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:19

For He made Him [Christ] who knew no sin *to be* sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Do not overlook the importance of the end of this verse. The purpose of Jesus taking your sin is so that “You might become the righteousness *of God* in Christ.” Though Jesus had committed no sin, He was condemned with your sin and the sin of the whole world. He was condemned with your sin. For you, the opposite is true. Though you have done nothing righteous, you were credited with God’s righteousness so that you are blessed instead of being condemned. God exchanged His abundant life and righteousness for your sin and condemnation. Now you have peace and God’s good will toward you given through grace. Grace means you are under God’s favor without having done anything to earn it. Grace is always a gift from God.

Once you are in Christ, you receive God’s righteousness. Since the time sin came into the world, mankind has used religion as a tool to elevate himself up to God. Yet no religion has even come close. In fact, God used the law of religion to show the impossibility of man overcoming his own sin nature, and showing that it is impossible for anyone to raise themselves up to God’s standard of perfection.

Yet now you are a possessor of God’s righteousness. In other words, God has raised you up, together with Him, so that you are now in fellowship with your Creator without fear or doubting. Doubt only comes when religion is reintroduced into faith. Faith mixed with religion is stripped of its power. Look at **Ephesians 2:5-6**

⁵ even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),

⁶ and raised *us* up together, and made *us* sit together in the heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus

Though your physical body is on earth, you are seated with Christ in the Kingdom of God. The Christian has the power to overcome this sinful world because we are always in Christ, and have the power of Christ within us.

The reason religion does not work is because it attempts to force our sinful nature to conform to a standard that goes against human nature. Jesus compared this to the painted graves He saw in Jerusalem. To beautify the tombs, they were whitewashed. Outwardly they were painted so they didn’t look like graves. Jesus compared this to the Pharisees, who were the religious elite of His

day. He said, “You are like whitewashed tombs which appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead bones and decay.”⁴⁹

We tend to look down on the Pharisees, but it wasn't only these men with that problem. Anyone who uses the efforts of religion are only presenting a front of outward holiness, but their human nature has not changed. They are still filled with corruption. This is because we were all born with a sinful nature.

Any parent can see this. A child does not have to be taught to be selfish, it is already within them. I never taught my kids how to hit their siblings in anger, throw fits, demand their way, disobey, or any of the behaviors I try to weed out of them. We learn how to act according to social norms, but our selfish, sinful nature is still within us. That is why mild-mannered people become aggressive when they are behind a keyboard on the internet, driving a car, or any other place where they feel shielded from direct view. Push someone to the breaking point and see if goodness comes out. When we lose our temper, do we speak words of life?

The Bible does not teach us to use religion to whitewash our behavior. God calls us to become a new creation.

When a Pharisee named Nicodemus came to Jesus by night because he recognized God's work in Him, they had an interesting conversation. Nicodemus was approaching the conversation from the physical perspective, and Jesus showed that true life is of the Spirit. Jesus said, “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

This baffled Nicodemus because he did not yet understand the new life being revealed through Christ. The Bible also refers to our new birth as the ‘circumcision of the heart’.⁵⁰ Circumcision was an ordinance of the Old Testament. A male child had to have the flesh of his foreskin cut away so he could enter the covenant of promise. All the religious ordinances of the Old Testament were symbolic of what would one day be accomplished in Christ, though they did not understand this at the time.

In the New Testament, God calls us to allow Him to cut away the flesh from our heart, so we can enter into His covenant of promise in Christ. Our old fleshly nature is taken away, and we are given a new nature which is born of God. We are born again because our old nature died by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit removes the fleshly nature of our heart so we can be raised as a new creation, which is what it means to be born again.

That is what Baptism represents. Jesus took upon Himself the sin of the world and buried it with Him at His death. At the

⁴⁹ Matthew 23:27

⁵⁰ Deuteronomy 30:6, Romans 2:29

resurrection, He was raised into new life. According to the Bible, when we put our trust in Christ, we enter into His work at the cross. We are then buried with Christ, and raised into new life with a new nature and new spirit. **2 Corinthians 5:17** says:

Therefore, if anyone *is* in Christ, *he is* a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

This was foretold in the Old Testament. **Ezekiel 36:26-27**

²⁶ "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

²⁷ "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do *them*.

No longer do you depend on religion or personal acts to change your behavior. At your new birth, God gives you a new nature that is rooted in Christ. He takes away the old nature that was hardened from sin, and gives you a new nature that is born in righteousness and is tender toward God. What's more, God places His Holy Spirit within you, and He leads you into all righteousness. You no longer force yourself to live godly – it's in your nature to do so.

Just as it was in your nature to sin before, it will be in your nature to do righteousness now. Before Christ, hearing the Bible or 'God talk' made us uncomfortable. After Christ, worldliness will make something inside us uncomfortable. Of course, we have to learn how to walk according to our new life. I won't be able to address why Christians struggle with sin here, but I do go into this in my book, *The Spirit Filled Life*. If you are not able to get this book for any reason, contact me on exchangedlife.com and I will provide a link where you can get a pdf version of the book for free.

It is often believed that Christians have to deprive themselves of the enjoyments of life, and that Christianity is about keeping rules, depriving yourself, and fighting against the things you desire. This is not even close to the truth.

It is true that your desires will change. When you have a new nature, you will act differently. Even though the flesh still craves sin, as you mature, your spiritual life will become stronger, and your desires will begin changing as well. You will still pursue the things you desire, but your desires will match who you are inside – not who you were before Christ. A Christian enjoys a fuller life because they have a God who supplies their needs, gives them purpose, and teaches them how to delight in the journey of life.

In sin, our desires are gratified for a moment, but it always leaves the heart longing for something more, and our heart never

quite seems to find what will fulfill us. A Christian has desires that are born out of a purpose, and God fulfills our hearts as we pursue the purpose He has designed into our lives. The craving of sin starts dying as we learn that it is a mirage that holds empty promises, and hinders us from experiencing the things that truly bring us happiness.

It all begins with the call to come to Him. God's invitation is to look at the cross. Jesus took all your sin, shame, and the things that condemn you upon Himself, and nailed it to His cross. It was buried with Christ and taken out of the way. Now He invites you to die to your old life by allowing Him to take it out of the way and give you a new life. With this new life is a new nature and fellowship with your Creator. You will have a relationship that has no barriers between you and God. No matter what you do, what struggles you have, or what in this life feels threatening, you are invited to come confidently to His throne of grace, where you belong.

God takes the burdens and gives you the endless supply of His grace. To receive righteousness, the only thing God asks of you is to trust Him with your sins. True faith is not trying to produce your own goodness for God, but placing your sin into His hands so He can replace it with His righteousness. You don't become righteous for God. You become the righteousness of God!

It's often thought that we invite Jesus into our lives, but the message of the gospel is that God invites us into His life. God invites you to step out of the old life built upon the fragile ego of self, and into the life He has prepared for us, which is built upon the solid rock of Christ.

If you have never experienced the new life of faith, it begins with the words of your own mouth. **Romans 10** says:

⁹ that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

¹⁰ For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.

The exact words you use are not important. Putting your trust in Him is what matters. Here is a sample prayer to get you started:

Lord Jesus, I thank you for taking my sins and nailing it to your cross. I believe you died to take away my sins, and rose again to give me life. I give you my sins and my old life. I receive your righteousness and the new life you promised me. I place my trust in Jesus Christ alone and confess you as my Lord. In Jesus name, amen.

Discussion Questions

Read John 8:3-11. Did this woman break the law?

Were the religious leaders right in saying that she must be judged?

Why did Jesus say, “Neither do I condemn you?” if she was guilty of breaking the law?

Read John 14:9 and John 16:27.

If seeing Jesus is the same as seeing the Father, how should we view God?

Is this different than you have been taught?

Was Jesus harsh on sinners?

Does God love us less when we sin?

Is God demanding our love?

Explain what the gospel is.

Read Colossians 2:11-15. Explain the work of Christ and how it applies to your life.

The Great Exchange

One of the great myths of Christianity is that you must get your life right with God in order to be accepted by Him. This teaching is not taught in the New Testament. It's not your job to repair your broken soul. It's your job to trust in God's work enough to let Him take away the old and replace it with the new life offered through the cross at Jesus' death.

Before I explain, let's take a moment to clarify the difference between the Old and New Testaments. You may have heard the word 'covenant'. The word 'testament' and 'covenant' are interchangeable, for both of these English words are translated from the same Greek word.⁵¹ Greek was the dominant language during the time when the New Testament was written.

Covenant / testament means an agreement or a pact that cannot be broken without the death of the testator (the one who has guaranteed the pact). In some cases, the covenant doesn't come into action until after the testator has died, such as a will, or promise to give an inheritance that was secured through a covenant.

The old covenant (or Old Testament) was a covenant between God and His people, Israel. The old covenant was heavily dependent upon man. Since man (God's people) entered the covenant, they made a pact with God that in order to be in His promise, they would accept the requirement to live perfectly. Any failure to keep the law would receive the penalty outlined in the law.

At the heart of the law was the 10 Commandments; however, there were not only ten commands. These ten were the foundation of the entire Old Testament law. If God's people broke the law, the law had penalties. To understand this, think about modern laws. To be a citizen of any nation, you are under certain laws. If you break these laws, there is a penalty, and violators are stripped of possessions or freedoms.

To be a citizen of God's Kingdom, there were laws that had to be kept, and any violation would place the person under the judgment of the law. Yet because God knew man could never measure up to a law based on a heavenly standard, He put provisions in the law to protect man. He would allow man to substitute an animal in their place so the animal would be judged

⁵¹ Matthew 26:28 'covenant', Greek word *diatheke*
2 Corinthians 3:14 'testament', Greek word *diatheke*

by the law in place of themselves. This is why there were sacrifices in the Old Testament.

To temporarily atone for sin, the people would bring a lamb before the priest. The lamb would be examined under the requirements of the law. It could not have any spot or blemish, but had to be perfect. Then the lamb would stand in judgement instead of the people. In a later chapter, we'll look at this in more detail.

This was a foreshadow of Christ, who would become the Lamb of God for all people, and He would be judged for sin so we could walk free.

Under the old law system, man could never experience the fellowship with God that was originally intended. The Old Testament was a never-ending cycle of failure to keep the law, sacrifice, attempting again the next year, failing to keep it, and sacrificing again. God's people never experienced the promise because the law was based on a spiritual ability that man lacked, so it was impossible to walk in the promise.

The law was never intended to make people right with God. It was intended to show mankind that he needed something greater than himself to reach God. Religion balks at the idea that the law can't make people righteous. This is because many still believe they can make themselves good, and never understand that the purpose of the law was to expose sin – not create righteousness.

The law is the litmus test. When applied, the law either agrees that you are already perfect, or reveals that you fall short. This is why Romans 3:20 says that by the law, no one will be justified in God's sight, for by the law we have the knowledge of sin.

Let me give an example that reveals our imperfection. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, He said, "You shall love the Lord your God with ALL your heart, all your mind, all your soul, and all your strength."

Sadly, church teaching often misunderstands the point of this passage. Jesus presented this to a group of lawyers (those whose profession was to study the Old Testament law). He presented this law to those who falsely believed they were keeping the law. It was presented, along with the second greatest commandment (to love your neighbor as yourself), to prove to them that they were not righteous. Jesus used these commands to shatter the self-delusion of people who thought they were good because they were farther along than those they deemed as sinners. Instead of walking away proud of their accomplishments, Jesus used the law to defeat their self-righteousness.

Jesus wasn't teaching people that they must keep these two commandments in order to be right with God. Jesus was showing that with only two commandments, He could show that everyone

was under the condemnation of the law. The religious elite and the drunkard were both under the same burden of guilt.

That is the purpose of the law – that every mouth may be stopped and every person become guilty before God (Romans 3:19). Why does God use the law to make everyone see their guilt? So he can reveal the promise of Romans 3:21: The righteousness of God, apart from the law, is revealed, and it is received by faith through Jesus Christ.

The law says that if you are going to present yourself to God, you must be of the same substance as God. God is love, so anyone who wants to present themselves to God, must be as God and love with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength. Not some. Not most. Not even most of the time. All means 100%. Unless you ARE love, you can't fulfill this law. Anyone who tries must face the warning of the Bible that if we offend in one area, we are guilty of the whole law.⁵²

You are either perfect, or you are under the condemnation of the law – unless you find a way to escape the law. And there is only one escape – death. Romans 6:7 tells us, “For he who has died has been freed from sin.”

This is where we begin to learn what it means to have an exchanged life. God does not intend to take the sinner and fix up his or her old life. God intends to bury the old life and resurrect you into new life. To understand this, let's take a deeper look at the cross.

The Work of the Cross

Through the conviction of the law of sin and death, God reveals our need and invites us to come to His gift of life by faith. On the cross, Jesus accomplished several important things. Through the cross He:

Bears the judgment of sin under the law on our behalf.

Takes away the law.

Buries our old nature.

Resurrects us into a new spiritual nature.

Places His Spirit within us.

Gives us His righteousness.

Places us in His promise.

Let's examine the cross in a little more detail.

Understanding the work of the cross is important, for if you don't understand these things, you will be looking for hope in the wrong direction. Religion points you back to your old life with

⁵² James 2:10

orders to do the impossible – fix something God has relegated to the grave. This causes people to search for answers in human effort. The problem is that you can't fix what God has crucified and buried. It is foolish to empower the flesh and try to make it act contrary to its nature. But through Christ, you have escape this.

2 Peter 1:4 tells us that we have escaped the corruption of the world through the promise given through the cross. This promise also comes with a warning. If having escaped, you are again entangled, your current condition is even worse than when you didn't know the truth.

The evidence can be seen in countless churches. People who return to the things of the world, including religion, have no peace, joy, or confidence. Many Christians have less joy than the world around them, and while the Bible promises that God's perfect love casts out all fear, a lot of Christians live in constant fear. They have no confidence in God's acceptance, and live as though they had never been saved from sin. Because their trust has turned from Christ back to the power of sin, it rules them. This shows through fear, doubt, and other struggles. Even the sinful habits that once had lost its power begins returning, and can even seem to exert greater power.

These things occur because the Christian's soul can only have rest in the life of the Spirit. The Spirit does not operate through the flesh, so when a Christian tries to mix the two, there is no power to live as an overcomer. Those who look to the flesh for hope or power are worse off than those who are still of the flesh.

This is a good opportunity to look at the work of the cross over the flesh. The flesh is our physical bodies. We were born into a fleshly spirit that was dead to God and naturally operates in sin. Sin is anything that misses the mark of the life of the Spirit. The word 'sin' means miss the mark. The Bible describes our old life in the flesh this way, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."⁵³

Sin is not just lying, stealing, adultery, and the big things we think of when we picture sin. It is anything of the flesh. Our old human nature was driven by the flesh. Human nature is of the flesh and will ALWAYS miss the mark of the glory of God. Romans 7:14 explains that the law is spiritual, but man is of the flesh (or carnal). The Bible also explains that the natural (or fleshly person) cannot receive the things of God, cannot discern the things of God, and cannot do the things of God, for they can only be seen through the eyes of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14).

⁵³ Romans 3:23

This also explains why the Bible says that all our attempts at righteous acts are filthy in God's sight.⁵⁴ The Apostle Paul had been a Pharisee and spent his life working to accomplish the deeds of the law. When he discovered Christ, he called all of his righteous acts 'trash' compared to gaining Christ.

If the deeds of human effort were trash before Christ, they are still trash after Christ. So, the person who turns back to that old, dead way of living, even if it is religious, is turning back to the same trash they escaped from before they found their life in Christ. Yet it's worse because now it is incompatible to who they are now. At least in our old life, the acts of the flesh were being performed by a nature based in the flesh. Now many Christians are trying to do the acts of the flesh from a nature born of the Spirit. That is why Christianity is such a struggle for so many people.

Let's break it down. We have already looked at how the law reveals to us that we are sinful (of the flesh) and can't rise up to the requirement of perfection needed to have union with God. Then the law points us to Christ with the invitation to receive the promise of new life. However, in order to receive, something must be removed, and this is where faith enters. Faith calls us to release everything so God can remove it and exchange it with something better.

That something better is a new spirit with a new nature. Along with it comes the gift of righteousness. Only then can we begin to walk in the life of faith. Then our spiritual growth is not trying to become better, but learning how to let go of old ways of thinking so we can take on the new ways of thinking.

Sin is revealed ONLY so we recognize that we are holding on to trash. As long as we treasure the trash, we won't be willing to let go of it. So, God reveals sin through the law and by the conviction of the Holy Spirit. Then God invites us into life with a single requirement – trust Him enough to take the sin away so we can receive righteousness. The ONLY gift you can give to God is your sinful life. But God doesn't wash it up and give it back. He buries it and raises you up as a new creation! This is an important passage, so carefully read **Romans 6:4-7**

⁴ Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

⁵ For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be *in the likeness* of His resurrection,

⁶ knowing this, that our old man was crucified with *Him*,

⁵⁴ Isaiah 64:6

that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.

⁷ For he who has died has been freed from sin.

Jesus died in weakness, but was resurrected into incorruptible glory. When you trust your life to Christ, you enter the work Jesus revealed on the cross. You, the old you, is buried with Christ. We as Christians are crucified with Christ so that our body of sin might be done away with. Then you are entering the promise God gave back in Ezekiel 36:26-27. God promised to take our sinful heart (or sinful nature) out of us, and give us a new heart (new nature) that is born of God. He will give us a new spirit that is born of God, and He will give us His Spirit to live within us.

We are united with God through our new spirit and His Holy Spirit within us. That means you are in constant fellowship with God – even when you don't realize it. In the flesh, you will be blind to the life of the Spirit, and this is why most people can't see the depth of the relationship God has brought us into.

Jesus called this event 'being born again'.⁵⁵ The Bible also tells us that our new spirit that was born of God cannot sin, because it remains in God.⁵⁶ This agrees with the promise we see in Ezekiel, which says that our new spirit will naturally desire the things of God and will keep God's ways because it is of God. The Bible records the evidence of this when the church first began. The gentiles (or non-Jews) who did not have the law or even know the law, were suddenly doing by nature the things required of the law, proving that God had written it in their hearts.

They did not follow the law. They looked only at Jesus, which caused them to follow the leading of the spirit, and by nature (their new nature) they kept God's ways without any human effort on their part.

However, if you read the book of Acts, which is the history of the birth of the church, an interesting thing happens. Those who still believed that God's people must follow the law came in and started teaching the new believers that receiving Christ wasn't enough. They had to also keep the law. So, their eyes were turned from Christ and to the law, and then sin re-emerged and spiritual growth stopped. They were sincere, but sincerely wrong.

This is why the Apostle scolded the church and said, "By this time you ought to be teachers, but you need someone to again teach you the basic principles of God."⁵⁷

⁵⁵ John 3:3

⁵⁶ 1 John 3:9

⁵⁷ Hebrews 5:12

The Bible goes on to scold the early church for turning back to the law by stating, “Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth before whose eyes Jesus was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish, having begun by faith, do you now think you are being made perfect by the flesh”?⁵⁸

By trying to keep the law, they were disobeying the truth. And the efforts these Christians put forth in an attempt to keep the law was called the work of the flesh.

This problem still occurs to day, which is why so few Christians grow on toward maturity, and struggle with sin again. Submitting back under the flesh empowers the flesh. People may think that giving control to the flesh for the purpose of keeping the law is good, but the flesh will only keep the law as long as it boosts the ego through pride. Then the flesh turns back toward what it craves, which is the sins that enslaved you before you were delivered through Christ.

The flesh does a masterful job of masquerading pride and self-exaltation as works of righteousness. But this only works when the law is watered down to something we can keep. Then the flesh has glory, but not the glory of God. Our acts of the law are actually disobedience to the truth – which is that Jesus Christ was portrayed as crucified. The lie is only deceptive because it is designed to counterfeit the truth. It sounds good. It sounds logical. It appeals to the flesh. But if it does not acknowledge the completed work of Christ, it is disobedience to faith in Christ.

The deception calls us to accomplish God’s work, which is disobedience to the truth. It’s disobedience because we are called to put all our confidence in Christ and to have no confidence in the flesh. Human effort religion is the opposite of faith. It trusts in what we do for God instead of putting our faith in His accomplishment for us.

Keeping the law is pushing the work of Christ aside and replacing it with our own human effort. This is the same effort that God has already said is filthy in His sight.⁵⁹ We are then working for something God will cast out as trash, while believing we are serving God.

If God said we have escaped the law, why would we turn back and submit to it? If God said that the law was taken out of the way by being nailed to the cross, why does religion try to resurrect it from the grave?

⁵⁸ Galatians 3:1-3

⁵⁹ Isaiah 64:6

The Bible says that not only did God nail our sins to the cross, but He wiped out the written requirements of the law that was against us, which condemned us, when He nailed it to the cross.⁶⁰

The Bible calls the law, the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones.⁶¹ That law had glory for a passing time, but was replaced by the ministry of the Spirit. The law was the ministry of condemnation, but it passed away for something that excelled in glory – the work of Christ!⁶²

In essence, what teachers of the law are doing is persuading people to take their eyes off of Christ, and to submit back under the ministry of condemnation and death, while claiming it is the way of life. The purpose of the law was to reveal condemnation so you would recognize the valueless way of self-effort, so you can then recognize where true life is found – in Jesus Christ.

Of course, people falsely believe that if the law is done away with, then there are no rules to keep people in check, which will lead to more sin. Yet the opposite is true. According to the Bible, the law entered that sin might abound, which causes death to reign so men can discover that life is only found in Christ.⁶³

If the law causes sin to abound, then why go back to the law? The law is taught because people falsely believe that the law keeps sin in check, which it cannot do. The weakness of the law is that it is spiritual, and cannot be upheld by anyone in the flesh. The weakness of the law is the flesh.⁶⁴

The reason why people believe the absence of the law will lead to sin is because they do not believe what the Bible says – that we have a new nature that is born of God that cannot sin. The Bible points to the successful Christian as the one who had no law, but by nature kept the things in the law, thus proving that it was the work of God written in their hearts.⁶⁵

You are faced with two options. One has been proven to create failure, and one that is rarely tried because it requires faith in God's finished work, and His plan to call you to walk in that work.

Option one is that you have the choice to submit back under the law to try to keep something that God Himself did away with. God brought the law to an end in Christ.⁶⁶ Therefore, to keep the law by human effort is to reject God's declaration that all things are

⁶⁰ Colossians 2:13-14

⁶¹ 2 Corinthians 3:7

⁶² Colossians 3:7-11

⁶³ Romans 5:20

⁶⁴ Romans 8:3

⁶⁵ Romans 2:14

⁶⁶ Romans 10:4, 1 Corinthians 13:10

finished in Christ, and attempt to do for yourself what God has already accomplished.

This is why the Bible calls the works of the law ‘disobedience to the truth.’ God will not honor your works, which take upon yourself what God had purposed to be fulfilled in Christ alone.

The second option is to believe the gospel. Turn your eyes away from the law and religious acts by human effort, and trust fully in Christ. It is to believe what God has declared of you, that you are a new creation, born of God, with a new spirit that cannot sin because it always remains in God. It is to believe that sin is the result of putting confidence in the flesh, whether that be religious flesh, or lustful flesh.

Walking in the Spirit is to believe that if you live by faith, you will do by nature the things that please God, and when you sin, it is a reminder that you have allowed your mind to drift back into the flesh, where nothing good dwells.⁶⁷

You are not called to keep rules. You are called to walk by faith. That is when you have the promise of God, “I will cause you to walk in my ways to do them.”

In the flesh, sinful desires re-emerge and you again have to resist what your flesh craves. In the spirit, you have a new heart that desires the same things God desires for you. You no longer have to stop resisting sin. The desire for sin dies as your desire for good grows.

On the cross, Jesus put to death the old man (nature) with his deeds. The Bible says that by faith, you placed your sins on the cross and you were buried with Christ and crucified, “That the body of sin might be done away with.” In Romans 6:6, the phrase ‘done away with’ is translated from a Greek word (the original language of the New Testament) which literally means, ‘unemployed.’⁶⁸

Your body of flesh was deactivated when the old nature / old spirit of sin was buried with Christ. Now that you have a new spirit, the only way your body of sin can pursue sin is by you turning your mind back toward the flesh. Which means that when you are struggling, the real battle is not that you are not trying hard enough. It is that your mind is not resting in the right things.

This is also why the Bible says, “The just shall live by faith.”⁶⁹ It is also why the Bible says, “Without faith it is impossible to please God,” and that God is the rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.⁷⁰ You are not rewarded for keeping the law, but by seeking the things of God, which are all revealed in the person of Christ.

⁶⁷ Romans 7:18

⁶⁸ Katargeo – to render idle, deactivated, unemployed

⁶⁹ Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, Hebrews 10:38

⁷⁰ Hebrews 11:6

At the cross, your sins were exchanged for God's righteousness. Your old nature was exchanged for a new nature, born of God. The law of sin and death was exchanged for the law of faith.⁷¹ Once you enter into Christ by faith, everything is changed. No longer are you operating in your own righteousness, but you are operating in God's righteousness. You are righteous because you have the righteousness of God. Take to heart the words of **2 Corinthians 5:21**

For He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Jesus committed no sin, yet He became sin for us, and then He nailed that sin to the cross at His death. Likewise, you committed no righteousness, yet you have become the righteousness of God in Christ. If you have received the gift of life in Christ, you are righteous. You will always be righteous. To declare otherwise is to utter words of disbelief in what God has said. You aren't righteous because of what you have done, but because you trusted in what God has done.

You are justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law (Romans 3:28). The word 'justified' means to be rendered righteous.

None of this is your doing. God foretold of this when He said, "No flesh shall be justified in my sight." That means that God will never declare any deed of human effort as an act of righteousness. Everything good in your life is the result of your faith, or trust, in God's exchange. Everything right and good is because you have given God something that is not right. You are righteous because you entrusted your sin into God's hands, and He exchanged that sin for His righteousness. You are a new creation because you believed God and had the faith to let go of your old life into His hands, and He exchanged it with new life and a new spirit.

You are living in the life of the great exchange. Whatever is wrong in your life, entrust to God without pretense. Stop trying to get your life right, and trust in His gift, which makes you right. All things pertaining to life and our walk of godliness have been given to us through Christ.⁷² Your purpose is to discover these things and become a light to the world around you. These can only be discovered in Christ. You will not find them in the law, and you cannot accomplish for God what He has already completed for you.

Receive His great exchange as you walk in faith! Then let God cause you to accomplish His purpose as He teaches you how to walk

⁷¹ Romans 3:27-28

⁷² 2 Peter 1:3

in the Spirit, where His will is accomplished in your life and for your good.

Discussion Questions

Read Matthew 5:17-18. How does verse 17 teach us the meaning of verse 18?

Read Ephesians 2:14-16. On the cross, what did Jesus abolish in His flesh?

Read Colossians 2:12-17. What did Jesus nail to the cross? According to verse 17, what is the shadow that pointed to Christ?

Read Hebrews 10:1. Why is the law called a shadow of good things to come?

Read Romans 7:5. Does the law produce righteousness?

Read Romans 8:2. What were we delivered from? What does the Bible call the law?

Read 2 Corinthians 3:5-8. What does the Bible call the 10 commandments (which were written on stone)? What is the Bible saying will come to an end through Christ?

Review 2 Corinthians 5:21. What makes us righteous?

Read Romans 4:3-5. According to this passage, what makes us righteous?

Read Romans 3:28. How are we justified before God?

What is the Bible teaching us about the law?

Sin Can't Defeat Love

Zephaniah 3:17

The LORD your God in your midst, The Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet *you* with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing."

Religion loves the concept of an angry, vengeful God, but this is not how scripture portrays the Lord. God is not angry at you when you fall short of righteousness. The Bible says that God does not look at mankind with anger because of his weakness to sin, for He understands that people are limited to their flesh.⁷³ At least we are limited to the flesh until we discover the new life of the Spirit.

You may have been taught that when you sin, God is angry at you, but this is simply not true. God hates sin because of the harm it brings upon us; however, His plan is not to judge us, but to judge sin and rescue us from its grip.

Jesus demonstrated love, not judgment, when He walked the earth in the flesh. Not one time did Jesus place any requirement on any person, other than faith. The only exceptions were when self-righteous people tried to justify themselves. Then Jesus used the requirements of the law to prove that all fall short – even the most religious among us.

Faith is believing what God has said and trusting that He will do what He has promised. Faith believes what God declares, even when it seems impossible. Faith believes that God declared us clean, when our flesh is still tainted by this world. Faith believes that God has the power to do what cannot be accomplished by the natural world.

When sick people came to Jesus, He healed them and forgave sin. Four men brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus for healing, and Jesus said to the bedridden man, "Your sins are forgiven of you."

He said this without the man having done anything. The religious people asked, "How can this man forgive sins?" not knowing that He was God in human form.

Jesus answered by saying, "That you may know that I have the power on earth to forgive sins," He then turned to the paralyzed man and said, "Arise. Take up your bed and go to your house."

What Jesus is making clear is that sin is the cause of disease, for sin is what brought sickness and suffering into the world. To heal the man's body isn't nearly as miraculous as healing the man of his

⁷³ Psalm 78:37-39

sin. Jesus used the healing as evidence that He had the power over sin. Jesus did not come into the world to show us how to live, though His example does accomplish this. Jesus came into the world to defeat sin, and since death came by sin, He also conquered the grave and death. Jesus explained this in **John 5:24-25**

²⁴ "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.

²⁵ "Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live.

What is required of you to become a partaker of life? To hear His word and believe on Him. This is explained beautifully in Romans chapter 5. Just as through one man's offense, sin entered into the world and spread to all, through one person's righteous act, life comes to all people. Through Adam, death and sin came to all, but through Christ, life and righteousness came to all. We entered into sin through Adam. Now we enter righteousness through Christ.

The Bible even makes it clear that sin came to all, even to those who did not participate in Adam's sin. We are all born into sin, not because of what we did as an infant, but because we are all in Adam through our human nature.

Yet Jesus is the opposite of Adam. Sin is reversed in Christ. Just as you were in the bondage of sin because of what Adam did, you are now in righteousness because of what Jesus has done. Through birth you entered in through Adam. In the new birth of the Spirit, you enter life and righteousness through Christ. You don't become righteous because of what you have or have not done. You become righteous because you are born into it through Christ. In that new birth, you have a new nature because you are given a new spirit which is born of God.⁷⁴

A religious leader came to Jesus to question Him. He saw the miracles and knew the things he saw could only come from God. So, he wanted to know what Jesus meant about the life in the Spirit. Jesus said, "Unless a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Jesus then said, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."

We are promised new life through faith in Christ. The Bible promises that we receive a new nature born of the Spirit when we enter Christ through faith. Then all things become new, and we

⁷⁴ Ezekiel 36:26-27, 1 John 3:9, 2 Corinthians 5:17, John 3:3-6, Romans 2:14-15

stop trying to live through the works of human effort in the flesh, and begin living by faith, which is how we walk in the Spirit.

That is when we quit worrying about our weaknesses, sins, and failures, and begin learning how to walk with Him – which always places us into a life of godliness. We don't have to understand it. We just have to learn how to trust that sin was defeated and we live in the gift of righteousness.

And yes, sin was defeated – though most live as though it still has power. Sin indeed does have power, but only when we submit to its power. Sin has no power over the believer, but it has great power over the faithless. This is why most teaching has one fundamental flaw. We are taught to believe in the power of sin, instead of believing the word, which tells us that sin was conquered. Look at **John 3:17**

For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

God does not condemn your sin. He calls you into salvation. To understand this better, look at **John 1:29**

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

Read that last sentence very carefully. Jesus came to take away the sin of the world. Do you believe that your sin was taken away in Christ? Or do you believe that the sin of the world was so great that Christ failed to accomplish His goal? Or perhaps you just think it's your sin that God cannot overcome. Or do you believe that your sin prevents God from loving you? Look at **Romans 5:8**

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

God loves you, and sin cannot defeat that love. To prove this, God demonstrated His love toward you, that while you were in sin, God attacked sin, defeated it, and rescued you from its power. Now He stands at the gates of the prison cell and calls for you to come out of the prison and walk in His freedom.

Sin is defeated, and the enemy is bound. He may call out threats and discouragement so you don't believe, but a lie only has power when someone gives it weight. The enemy points at your sin and says, "God is holy and cannot love someone who has these failures."

God calls out with the reminder, "The cross of Jesus Christ leaves no question of the depth of His love for you."

God demonstrated His love, in that while you were in sin, Jesus died for the ungodly. When I struggled to believe, I did so because I was looking at my failures and doubting His love. But when I read

that God demonstrated His love by dying for me, the ungodly, it changed my perspective. I realized that instead of sin disqualifying me from His love, my ungodliness qualified me. That day I gave my sin to God as an act of faith. I trusted God with my sin knowing that He was not condemning me, but inviting me to give Him my failure so He could replace it with His success.

Sin was the only gift I had for Him, but that was exactly what God wanted. For in that moment, when I believed in His love, I knew I could stop hiding my sin. That is when I trusted enough to release it into His hands. That was the day it became God's responsibility to change me and deal with the temptations that had once been too strong for me.

The remainder of this book is about how to learn to trust in God's love, and how we, who are flawed creatures, learn to walk in the flawless life of faith. It is learning how to trust in the promises given to each person. Promises that God says He will never revoke and sin can never defeat. But we must learn how to start trusting in the promise and learn how to stop trusting in the power of sin (which was completely defeated on the cross).

This book is written from the perspective of life as a Christian (or believer in Christ). If you have not yet put your trust in Christ, let's take a moment to look at what this means.

We have already looked at the promise that Jesus came to take sin out of the way. Jesus was God in the flesh. The Bible says that Jesus was in the form of God, but humbled Himself to take on the role of a bondservant, to live under the law, perfectly fulfill the law, and then to be judged by men as a sinner, condemned to die, and nailed to the cross. This was so He could exchange your guilt for His innocence. He stood in your place under the condemnation of the law, so you could stand in His place, completely justified before the law and fully right with God.

The Bible explains that this was God's act of love for you. On the cross, Jesus took on your sin, so it could be judged in Himself. Then when you trust in Him, you receive the righteousness of God as a gift. You become righteous because God credits you with His righteousness as if you are just as righteous as Jesus. You are saved through faith in Jesus. It is a gift of God and is not of works. A gift can't be earned. It can only be received. Look to Jesus and believe that your sins were nailed to the cross with Him, along with the old nature that is corrupted by sin. Trust in Him to give you a new spirit that possesses God's righteousness. We receive this gift as we believe and confess what God has declared for us. Look at **Romans 10:9-11**

⁹ that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

¹⁰ For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.

¹¹ For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame."

Believe in your heart and confess Him as Lord, and you will be saved. Then you have the promise that you can never be put to shame. You will never be under the shame of condemnation again!

For some people, there is an instant affirmation. Other people grow into this understanding. What is important is that you continue to learn about Christ in the word, and through good teaching. I also believe baptism is important, for it is the declaration of faith that we died with Christ and were raised with Him into new life.

Never forget that the Christian walk is about learning of Christ, and from Him, we discover the works He calls us into. It isn't about what you can do for God. It is about what God has done for you, and learning how to allow God to work through you. It is always His work, and we enter into His labor. Then we have the honor of being partakers of God's work.

Discussion Questions

Read Psalm 78:37-39

How did God respond when people failed to keep the law?

Do you believe God is angry at you?

Read Ezekiel 36:26-27, 1 John 3:9, 2 Corinthians 5:17, John 3:3-6, and Romans 2:14-15.

Now read 1 Corinthians 2:14.

What changes in our hearts when we come to Christ?

If someone does not have a new spirit, can they walk in righteousness?

What does it mean to be born again?

What makes us righteous?

Do we obey to become righteous? Or does the gift of righteousness cause us to obey?

If sin has been defeated, why do Christians struggle with sin?

Read Romans 5:10.

If God loved us while we were enemies, what happens if we sin now?

How does the Christian overcome sin?

What gives sin its power?

Are you able to trust God with the sins that you are ashamed of?

How do you enter into Christ and find everlasting life?

Have you put your trust in Christ?

Read 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Romans 10:9-11.

What does it mean that Jesus became our sin and we become God's righteousness?

How do we receive this gift of life?

The Victory of Defeat

Have you ever felt defeated in your faith? Have you ended up turning your back on God, and now feel as though you've blown it? Do these things disqualify us from the invitation of God?

The man Jesus called 'the stone' and promised to use as the beginning of the church started his ministry in defeat. After declaring his love for Jesus, he ended up denying that he even knew who Jesus was.

If you are familiar with the story, you already know this is Peter. Peter had a strong personality and was the first to speak up and take over each time he had an opportunity to interject himself. You see his comments more in Jesus' ministry than anyone other than Jesus. He was that annoying personality that always craved attention and recognition. But that wasn't his downfall. His downfall was his personal strength. He believed he could serve God and even declared his love for Jesus as greater than anyone else's.

When Jesus foretold of His coming crucifixion, Jesus said, "All of you will betray me this night and leave me alone."

"Not so, Lord!" Peter said to rebuke Jesus. "Even if all of these forsake you," Peter scanned the room with his finger, "I will never forsake you. I love you more than them all. I will fight and even die for you." When Jesus warned that even Peter would deny Him, Peter rebuked these words with more declarations of his faithfulness and his willingness to even die for Christ.

God picked Peter for a purpose, but that purpose could never be fulfilled while Peter was fighting for God and standing upon his own strength. God allowed Satan to break Peter.

Jesus said, "Satan has desired to sift you as wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith will not fail. When you return to me, strengthen your brethren."

God was already declaring that Peter would deny Christ, but that his denial and betrayal did not disqualify him. In fact, Peter's failure would shake free his dependency on his own strength so God could bring out the spiritual strengths God was investing in him. In other words, when Peter's strength failed, God would use Peter's weakness to reveal God's strength in him.

After the last supper, Jesus took the disciples to a garden where He often taught. Judas had already left the supper and was in the process of betraying Jesus to those who wanted to kill Him. Jesus finished teaching, then withdrew with Peter, James, and John to pray. Jesus asked them to pray while He poured out His soul in prayer, knowing the time of His crucifixion was near. Peter, who had just declared his dedication, fell asleep. Jesus woke him, but he drifted off again. In Jesus' darkest hour, He sat beside the

sleeping disciples while he waited for the events to unfold. He woke them up as the guards approached.

When Peter realized what was happening, He tried to kill the servant of the High Priest. He swung his sword at the man's head, but he ducked and the sword cut off his ear. He had just assaulted the servant of the High Priest – an act punishable by death. Jesus rebuked Peter, and healed the man.

Knowing his efforts were not approved, Peter did not know what to do. He was already guilty of a serious crime, and since Jesus was unwilling to allow him to fight to defend Him, Peter felt lost. He dropped his sword and fled, along with the other disciples.

From a distance, he followed the procession to the palace, where Jesus was carried upstairs to be tried and sentenced to death. Peter managed to get into the courtyard of the palace. Guards were around, so he had to be careful. At least it was night, and most likely no one would recognize him as the sword swinging assailant. It was a chilly night, so he joined several people by a fire. A servant girl saw him and said, "Aren't you one of that man's disciples?"

"I am not," Peter said, and walked away from the fire.

A short time later, she started inciting people. She pointed to Peter and said, "This man was with Jesus."

Another person joined in. "Listen to your speech. You talk like a Galilean, just like Jesus."

"I told you, I am not His disciple. I do not even know that man." Now Peter was getting a lot of attention. People started questioning him and a soldier walked up and eyed him.

"Didn't I see you in the garden when we arrested Jesus?"

It was the worst possible situation. If this man could identify him as the one who attacked the servant, he would certainly be arrested. The Bible says that Peter began to call down curses upon himself. It's like him saying, "May God curse and condemn me to judgement if I'm lying. I never knew that man!"

At that moment, he was rescued by the guards escorting Jesus from the palace on their way to bring Him to the governor. Everyone's attention went to Jesus, and Jesus looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered His words, "Peter, before the rooster crows, you will have denied me three times." Then the rooster crowed in the distance, and Peter's heart broke. He walked out of the palace and wept bitterly.

Was all now lost? He made a stupid decision to attack a servant. He thought he was doing the right thing, but it was the folly of human effort trying to force God's will upon others.

But the decision to deny Jesus was worse. It was the ultimate betrayal. He had disowned Christ, and certainly God would disown him.

This wasn't the case at all. God allowed Peter to enter into the circumstances that would defeat him because his human effort was hindering him from experiencing the power of God. Jesus had once rebuked Peter by saying that he was listening to the voice of the enemy, who was causing him to value the things of man and not the things of God.⁷⁵ Now those human strengths had been revealed as powerless in the face of an adversity greater than Peter's personal strength.

Religion is valuing the things of man, while claiming them as the work of God. And as long as you or I are stuck in effort-based religion, God will allow that religion to be defeated. God NEVER judged Peter for his denial. God had already foretold that his human faith would be defeated, but the spiritual faith empowered by God would bring him back, and then Peter would strengthen the brethren. He would strengthen others because never again would Peter rely upon himself. From this day forward, he would find his strength in God.

Let me stop for a moment and address a passage that throws people off. In Matthew 10:33, Jesus said, "Whoever denies me before men, I will deny before my Father in heaven." So, shouldn't Peter's fall mean that Jesus would disown Him, and he would be denied in heaven?

The problem with understanding the small nuances of scripture is that the New Testament was written primarily in Greek, but we are reading it in English. Often times the same word will be used in English which may refer to more than one different word in the original Greek. Translators use the closest match, but in our language, the same word may have multiple meanings. For example, does 'match' mean that two items are alike? Or is it something you strike to start a fire?

The same is true in Greek. A word may have more than one meaning, and be translated differently based on the context, or it may be two words with different meanings being translated into a single English word that can hold more than one meaning.

The word 'deny'⁷⁶ in Matthew 10:33 means: to refuse something offered or to disregard His interest.

The word 'deny' used when Jesus said, "You will deny me three times," is a completely different word in the Greek.⁷⁷ This word (Luke 22:34) means: to affirm that one has no acquaintance with someone.

⁷⁵ Mark 8:33

⁷⁶ Arneomai: to disregard his interests, to not accept, refuse something offered

⁷⁷ Aparneomai: to affirm that one has no acquaintance with someone

Jesus' warning is that someone who denies Him, or refuses His offer of salvation, will be denied before the Father in heaven. God is not saying that if someone is weak in their faith, or has a moment of weakness and allows fear to overtake them, God will be angry and disown them. That would make salvation dependent upon our strength, which is the opposite of what scripture teaches.

Peter walked away from Jesus sorrowfully, believing he had blown everything. Peter completely abandoned the faith. He went back to fishing. But God never abandoned Peter. At the right time, Jesus sought out Peter and restored him.

God hasn't changed. When you are defeated in your faith, God does not abandon you. Like Peter, you may *feel* like God is angry and you may *feel* rejected, but feelings often don't equate with truth. Remember Jesus' warning, "Satan desires to sift you as wheat."

The enemy will tell you that your mistakes alienate you from God. He will tell you that God is angry at you. He will tell you that you can't return. You have blown it. You are disqualified. He will even tell you that you have lost your salvation, as though you have the power to destroy the work of God in your life. The good news is that you don't have that much power.

Peter thought all of these things. Peter even called down curses upon himself. He lived in a culture that fully believed in the power of those curses; however, Peter would soon discover that God never honored his curse upon himself, for as the Bible says, "When God has blessed, I cannot reverse it."⁷⁸

You can walk outside of God's blessing, but you cannot remove God's blessing. You can walk in the flesh where the abundant life seems out of reach, but it does not change what is already yours in faith.

In fact, when you return to Him from the despair of failure, you will be strength to your brethren. Once you discover the greatness of God, and how He has called you out of the old, and into the new, your failure becomes a word of testimony that encourages those around you.

Those of us who have blown it have an advantage. We are the people who discover that God does not want people who are determined to be strong for Him. We discover that God wants to become our strength. Those who blow it are those who learn to stop relying on the weakness of human strength, discover the value of grace, and learn how to trust in the limitless power of God.

Just as we discussed earlier, God's strength is made perfect in our weakness. This is why strong personalities have a hard time

⁷⁸ Numbers 23:20

discovering God's power. God does not share the throne with the flesh.

God does indeed use hardships to refine you. God will allow circumstances to take you to the point of helplessness because He wants you to experience the power of God within you. Sometimes we have to go through this in order to stop trusting in ourselves. Even when human effort succeeds, we are merely touching the shadow of what God wants us to experience. The true victory is found when God is working through us instead of us working for God.

God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.⁷⁹ God wants you to experience the greatness of His power. He wants you to experience the fullness of this Christian life, but this is not possible by human effort – which is the source of all pride.

Humility is recognizing His greatness. Humility doesn't produce timidity. Peter was humbled, and never again did he proclaim, "I will serve you, I will die for you, I love you more than these all..." The 'I will' in Peter died a painful death, but what replaced 'I will' was the 'I have'. "I have received all things that pertain to life and godliness through His promises."

The 'I will' led Peter into a position of defeat in the palace of his accusers. The humility that followed revealed a power of God that exceeds human limitations. This is why Peter could stand before a crowd of thousands, boldly proclaiming the power of Christ in front of the very people he cowered before a few weeks earlier.

Humility is why in the face of the threat of punishment, Peter and John could point to Christ with confidence and boldness. They were bold in God's purpose, not in themselves. The counsel that condemned Jesus saw the boldness of Peter and John, saw that they were uneducated, and were amazed. Their only conclusion was that they must have been with Jesus.⁸⁰

Human boldness is based on pride that always leads to a fall.⁸¹ Humility in the Spirit leads to boldness that is confident in Christ in the face of any circumstance. Faith produces confidence,⁸² and the joy of the Lord is our strength.⁸³ Humility causes people to see Jesus in us, because we aren't standing on ourselves or our abilities, but are standing in Christ.

Humility comes when we see the weakness of our flesh and the limitations of human abilities, and abandon them for the power

⁷⁹ 1 Peter 5:5

⁸⁰ Acts 4:13

⁸¹ Proverbs 16:18

⁸² Ephesians 3:12

⁸³ Nehemiah 8:10

we see in Christ. Humility comes to those who lean upon the promise of God's power to change us, work in us, and give us the power to hear the call of God, and then to answer that call.

The defeat of your personal efforts does not disqualify you, nor does it create the anger of God. God never showed any anger or condemnation towards Peter in his defeat. Neither is God angry at you.

You may have fallen into sin, made stupid decisions, or even ruined your life. However, a life in the flesh is already limited to this world, and God plans to replace it with His new life anyway. You may even have abandoned faith believing it doesn't work. Human faith doesn't work because it is dependent upon the weakness of human effort.

God isn't angry if you have failed or turned your back on Him. These things are blessings, for now God has revealed that strength doesn't come from you, and He is inviting you to stand in His power. This is the open door of humility so you can enter into the fullness of His grace!

Sometimes God has to let us experience failure so we can have eyes to see His call of faith.

Discussion Questions

What made Peter vulnerable to temptation?

Was God caught off guard by the circumstances that put the disciples in danger?

Did God put Peter in the position to fail? Why or why not?

How did Peter's denial of Christ affect his relationship with Christ?

How did God judge Peter for denying Christ?

Why did Jesus affirm Peter's calling before Peter denied Him?

Read Matthew 26:33-35, John 13:37

Who was Peter focused on?

Did Peter's weakness become a place for God to reveal His strength? Explain.

Will God ever allow you to be overcome?

Does God want you to be strong for Him?

When you fail God, does God reject you? Explain.

Does humility create timidity?

How does our failure produce God's victory in us?

Focusing on Faith

Life is full of storms. Most storms are passing and minor, but there will be times when threatening storms arise. A few times in life you will have hurricanes pass through that can leave you in despair. It is these storms that reveal the foundation we are building upon.

Are you founded upon obedience and religion? Non-religion and pride? Both of these are weak foundations that depend on yourself. The person who declares that they need no religious crutch is building on the foundation of self and pride. The person who lives for obedience and keeping themselves religiously upright is also founded upon self and pride. These self-decorations may look different from the outside, but both have the same foundation.

I know this may seem odd, but the truth is, if you are anchoring your life on what you do or have done, you are building on sand. We can't recognize the weakness of our foundation until a storm hits. Jesus explained this in the parable of the two men who built a house. One on the sand, the other on the rock.⁸⁴

Both houses looked solid from appearances and both appeared to be equal. It could have been many years that both men lived without seeing a problem with the house. As life will do, one day a terrible storm passed through. The winds beat on the walls while the rain hammered at the foundation. One foundation could not erode, because it was solid rock. The other began washing out from under the house, and then great was the fall of that house.

Storms will arise in life. These storms will reveal the foundation you are building upon. Some storms shake us, but we can rebuild; however, there are times when life hits us so hard that our foundation can't withstand – unless it is standing upon something greater than the storm.

You don't build the foundation. If you do, you are already limited to the power of self-effort. When something greater than yourself or worldly security hits, you will be shaky and even in danger of collapse. Your religion will fail in that day. Your pride will fail.

You must build your life upon a foundation greater than yourself.

Have you ever heard someone say, "I must be doing something right," when a good thing happens? Or, "Why is God doing this to me?" when something hard enters life?

⁸⁴ Matthew 7:24

The truth is that God does not watch from the heavens and throw bolts of judgment down when we mess up, and blessings down when we do something right. There are principles He has built into life that will prosper those who act wisely, but wisdom does not prevent the storms. Ease and hardships are not the measure of God's favor toward you. You can do everything right, but still have to endure sufferings in this world. Jesus even stated this, "In this world you will have tribulations, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world."⁸⁵

The word 'tribulation' that Jesus used is actually the Greek word, 'thlipsis'. This word means great pressure, distress, and tribulation. In Jesus' parable, both men were hit by the same storm. People will look at one as God's judgment, and the other as God's protection. The truth is that God wasn't angry at one man for disobeying and pleased with the other.

The principle is that one built on the rock, and the other on sand. Both men worked hard, but one trusted in his work, and the other trusted the foundation. He could have built a one room house, or a mansion. The amount of effort isn't the point of the story. It is where the trust resided that is the point Jesus is making. Look at **1 Corinthians 3:11**

For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

When you look at your life, are you trusting in the foundation, who is Christ? Or are you looking at what you are doing or have done for God?

If your confidence in your relationship with God is based on feeling like you have done enough, you are building on sand. What you do right does not make your faith strong. What you do wrong, does not shake faith. Quite the opposite. Faith overcomes our weaknesses. Our weaknesses do not overcome faith. However, our weaknesses will overthrow our personal feelings of religious success.

People tend to believe that if they do enough for God and obey enough, their faith will grow and God will be pleased. Not so. You don't have the power to grow faith or please God by human effort. Works do not overcome sin. Personal effort will not overcome your sin. Here is how sin is defeated. Look at **1 John 5:4**

For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world-- our faith.

⁸⁵ John 16:33

This short passage tells us two things. First, once you were born of God by trusting in Christ, you are already an overcomer. Second, when life tries to rise up, the power that overcomes the world is your faith. Faith in Christ. Not faith in religion, personal effort, or your ability to will yourself out of temptation. The victory is already in Christ. Now you are being called to trust in this victory – which is faith. Then you are walking in victory and the world has no power. That includes the sins that easily overcome you. They only overcome when faith is pushed aside, for they have no power in faith.

It's time to exit the old-world way of thinking. It's time to stop trying to please God by what you do. The Bible tells us how to please God. Look at the passage I referenced earlier, **Hebrews 11:6**

But without faith *it is impossible to please Him*, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and *that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him*.

The only way you can please God is by walking in faith. Look at what this passage tells us. The meaning of the Christian life is not working ourselves into exhaustion, or performing religious acts, or depriving ourselves, or resisting temptation to the best of our abilities. The purpose of your life is to have fellowship with your Creator.

Through Christ, God has invited you into the fellowship of His perfect love. He has told you, “Let Me handle the issue of sin. Leave this burden at the door and I’ll take care of it. You come in and dine with Me.”

We spend so much time fighting against things that Jesus has already conquered that we never get to discover the invitation to enter into fellowship with God. As you diligently seek Him, you are discovering the unsearchable depths of what God has prepared for you. You will never stop discovering the goodness of God if you seek Him. But you also will never discover the depths of His goodness if you are stuck on the hamster wheel of religion.

God loves you and desires to walk with you. He wants you to know Him – not be afraid of Him. Your sins and failures are not what displeases God. It's when you trust in the power of sin that makes it impossible to please Him. When you think His love is too weak to get through your mistakes, unbelief becomes the barrier. The barrier is not from God's side, but from our side.

God is displeased with sin because He sees its negative effects on the one He loves. He doesn't want to harm you because of your sin; He wants to remove this harmful impurity from you.

We don't understand faith because we don't understand what God is doing. The reason faith comes by hearing the word of God is because the word reveals God's love. As we discover the depths of

God, we gain understanding and our trust in Him grows as we see His heart and intent toward us.

Stop building on the foundation of your efforts. Start building on the foundation of faith in Christ.

I want to reiterate this important truth again – the single greatest hindrance in the life of a Christian is not sin. At least not in the traditional way of thinking about it. According to scripture, whatever is not of faith is sin. This puts the people the church calls sinners in the same boat as those we think of as the most godly among us. Everyone struggles. It's just that some sins are hidden and others are out where the world can see.

What if you are struggling with one big sin and can't seem to overcome? You may have one habit or behavior that seems to entangle you each time you attempt to break free. Or if you seem to be climbing out of the pit of sin, and just as you feel you are making progress, you slip and fall all the way back down again. I have been there.

My life before understanding grace was rollercoaster Christianity. Just as it seemed like I was making progress and going up, my sin would overcome me, and I would plummet down again. I never seemed to improve, and every progress was short-lived.

In this chapter I'm going to share with you the secret of victory. It's a secret hidden in plain sight, yet so few people find it. I spent more than half my life looking for an escape, only to keep falling back into my sinful habits again and again. No one told me the secret of overcoming was to stop trying to overcome sin, and start looking at the overcomer of sin, Jesus Christ. The call is to step into faith, where sin has no power. Let's look at the example of the greatest failing in the Bible, and how Peter's failure led him to become an unstoppable picture of faith. But first, look at **Hebrews 12:1 - 2**

¹ Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

² looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

The cloud of witnesses are the testimonies of those who have experienced the power of faith. It is the examples in the Bible as well as the examples of common people who have experienced the extraordinary power of faith.

We lay aside the sin, not by human effort, but by looking unto Jesus. We cannot run the race of the victorious Christian life while

we are hindered by the sin that easily entangles us. And we all have that sin that ensnares us. However, through Christ, we are set free and we run along side Him as He gives us strength, endurance, and encouragement.

Look at the message of verse 2. Jesus faced the cross that He despised through the joy set before Him. Remember that Jesus became sin for us so that we could become the righteousness of God through Him. At the moment of the cross, Jesus struggled with the shame of the sin that would be heaped upon Him. On the night he was about to be betrayed, Jesus prayed, "If there is any other way, let this cup [of suffering on the cross] pass from Me." In the weakness of the flesh, Jesus saw the cross before Him, and He despised it. It threatened to overcome Him.

How did He overcome this insurmountable obstacle? Jesus took His eyes off the cross, and looked beyond it. He found joy through the hope set before Him, just beyond the cross. He overcame the threat of fear by taking His eyes off the circumstance and setting them onto the unchangeable and immovable life in the Spirit.

Tempting you to focus on the issues of this world is how the enemy works. You may despise the shame of your sin and the weakness of your flesh. You may be ashamed of your past, or even your present. Satan will use circumstances to drive you into fear, and your failures to drive you into shame. Once you are bound and ensnared, it is very difficult to run or escape from the bonds of the flesh. You cannot experience the power of your calling of God because you are tied up trying to disentangle sin from your life. Even if you have a moment of freedom, if the fear of failure remains your focus, there will be no power. We were not designed to live defensively, but offensively. We are called to run with endurance, not push against sin.

Satan desires to sift you through his fingers and keep you on the defensive. But faith in God's gift of righteousness through the cross overcomes all sin. This problem is not unique. Look at Jesus' encouragement of Peter (Simon) in **Luke 22:31-32**

³¹ And the Lord said, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat.

³² "But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren."

Simon and Peter are the same person.⁸⁶ Peter's weaknesses were about to overtake him. Because he was confident in his own

⁸⁶ Mark 3:16

abilities, Peter could not see the danger coming. The truth is that we all are helpless against the enemy when fighting in the realm of the flesh. Jesus said, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Scripture also teaches that our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual wickedness in high places.

The truth is that you cannot overcome sin through human effort. When you sin and ruin your efforts to live godly, Satan will come and sift you like wheat. He will use people to condemn you, your past to haunt you, your mistakes to shame you, and your failures to discourage you. He will try to replace your faith with shame.

Peter was so shamed and discouraged that he abandoned his calling. He left it all behind and went back to his previous life. But Jesus came calling and restored him. The failure that Peter thought disqualified him from God's purpose was actually a blessing. It was a blessing because it showed Peter that strength isn't a human quality, but is power from God through the Spirit. His greatest shame was a tool that forced him to stop looking at himself, and start depending on Christ.

On the heels of complete failure, complete strength was born. From the day Jesus taught Peter to be God-confident instead of self-confident, he was renewed in a way that would never allow him to be shaken again. Peter stood boldly before the very people he had cowered before a few weeks earlier. Peter had not been able to stand in the face of temptation, but after this change of perspective, temptation lost its power over him. The words of Jesus came true. His faith did not fail, and when Peter returned to faith, he became someone who strengthened his companions.

At first glance, it appeared that Peter's faith indeed failed, but it wasn't a lack of faith that was the problem. Jesus had already taught him that a grain sized faith was enough to move mountains and overcome the world. It wasn't a lack of faith, but the wrong focus that caused Peter's problems. And Peter could not understand the need to change his point of focus until failure drove him into the realization that his willpower, personal efforts, and self-confidence did not have the strength to stand in the face of an enemy that could sift him through his fingers like wheat.

Once Peter was defeated, he was in a state of mind to listen to the true message of the gospel - it's not about what you do for God, but learning how to walk by faith in what Christ has done.

This same principle applies to you. It doesn't matter what the sin is. The Bible is filled with examples of prostitutes, drunkards, thieves, murderers, and every other type of sinner becoming new creations, rescued from the sins that had once entangled them.

There is an example of a man who was possessed with a legion of demons. He was so wild, no man could tame him. He destroyed

his own body by cutting himself with sharp rocks, living among the tombs in a graveyard, and existing in a constant state of despair. Yet in a moment, Jesus changed everything. He was so radically changed that the town was afraid of him and the life-changing power of the gospel. The man that lived like a beast, was sitting in his right mind and learning from Jesus.

What is your sin, struggle, or failure? We all have them. We all have things we cannot overcome, and we all have changes we would like to make in our character, but can't seem to find the power to succeed. Like Peter, Satan desires to sift you like wheat. He will shove failure in your face, use others to beat you down, and temptation to expose your weakness. However, his greatest tool is your own mind. If your mind follows his leading, guilt, shame, and self-condemnation will be produced. The enemy will try to drive you into despair. You may even get to the point of self-loathing.

All the enemy has to do is keep you focused on yourself, your failure, or the thing that tempts you. You can be like Peter and promise God that you won't fail, that you'll never do it again, or that you will change, but these are promises you don't have the power to fulfill. However, Jesus' prayer has not changed. His promise is that your faith cannot fail, and when you return to Him, you will not only find victory, but that you will become the strength for others who are also struggling.

The problem isn't a lack of faith. Faith is a gift that God has already given you. The Bible promises that God has given each of us a measure of faith. The problem is that faith doesn't work in the flesh. The flesh (human strength and human effort) does not operate in faith. The flesh has no power in the Spirit; however, the Spirit has power over the flesh.

This is why I give this advice that is so rarely taught in the church. Stop worrying about your sin. Stop focusing on your sin. The Bible says that as you look to Christ, you are transformed into His glory by the Spirit within you. We are also promised that daily we are being transformed by the renewing of our minds, and this begins with this promise from **Philippians 4:8**

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy-- meditate on these things.

Along with this is the promise that when we stop being anxious, but through prayer and thanksgiving, lay your request at God's feet, then He will guard our hearts and minds through Christ.

This even applies to our struggle against sin. When you struggle, Satan is always ready to sift you to despair. He will try to

stir into your mind anxiety, guilt, fear, and shame. But your mind is renewed through faith. Faith is active in your spirit, which requires you to have your mind in the Spirit. Which also means you are looking to Christ. Peter never left his shame behind until his focus returned to Christ. Jesus never demanded that Peter apologize or do any type of penance. Jesus required that Peter put his trust in Christ, where his sin had already been dealt with on the cross. The moment Peter stopped looking at his shame and started looking at Jesus, he started walking in faith. Only then did the enemy lose all power. No longer did guilt haunt him. No longer did fear control him. Even better, no longer did his flesh have power over his life.

This is why I say, stop worrying about your sin. Stop focusing on your sin. Stop looking at your failures. It is not your job to stop sinning. It's not your job to fix anything in your life. Sin loses all power when you are walking by faith.

Even this is a process. You will walk by faith and things will be going well, but when temptation calls, it is trying to get your eyes off Christ. Once you turn from faith and look at temptation, it will burn you again. Just as you are transformed into Christ's glory as you focus on Him, your mind is enslaved again as you look to the flesh. When you are looking at your sin, you are no longer looking to Christ. Instead of transforming into His likeness, you will be receiving the power of the flesh and transferring power back to sin.

The principle is true whether you are looking at the flesh for temptation, looking at the flesh because of regret, or looking at the flesh for strength to do good. The moment you are focused on yourself, you are in the flesh and bound by its limitations and weaknesses.

When you are drawn away by temptation and realize you failed again, the answer is not to stay in the flesh by focusing on shame or regret, but to return your focus to Christ. We'll get more into this later in the book. The truth is that God never calls you to make amends by wallowing in self-loathing and guilt. You are called to trust in Christ and return to faith.

What you will find is that as you apply this principle, the weaknesses of the flesh will lose its grip as you learn to focus on Christ more. At first, you may fall a lot, but as you learn to trust in His love, the slips will become less frequent, and your spiritual health becomes stronger. As your spiritual life matures, you will outgrow temptation, and it will weaken. The daily renewing of your mind will teach you how to trust in Christ and have the expectation of strength from Him. Temptation only has strength in the flesh, but as you learn to live in the Spirit, the sin that once easily entangled you will wither away.

Discussion Questions

Read Proverbs 10:25, 1 Corinthians 3:11, Psalm 27:5, and Psalm 62:6-7.

How does faith in Christ prepare us for the hardships of life?

Why does faith give the Christian strength?

How does it change our expectations when we find ourselves in what seems impossible or disastrous?

Review Hebrews 11:6.

Why does faith please God?

What is faith?

What's the difference between religion and walking by faith?

What did Jesus mean by 'Satan desires to sift you as wheat'?

How does this apply to our lives?

Review 2 Corinthians 3:18

How does focusing on Christ transform us?

What happens if we focus on ourselves?

What happens if we are focused on our sins?

Dismantling Doubts

One of the greatest challenges of the Christian faith is the fear of sin, and the resulting anger of God. Many well-meaning, but incorrect teachings use fear to keep sin in check; however, this is not God's way. The Bible says that when we know and trust in God's love, His perfect love casts out all fear.

Sin is not defeated by fear of wrath; it is defeated by walking in faith. Sin is of the darkness, and faith is of the light. Darkness only exists when light is absent – it can never overcome light. Sin cannot defeat your faith in Christ. Faith comes by hearing the word of God; therefore, if the word is taught correctly, it should always strengthen your faith and disempower sin, as well as drive out fear.

When a fearful version of the gospel is taught, it causes people to doubt, and undermines the power of the Christian life. Fear may have a momentary response to try to resist sin, but in the long term, it has the opposite effect. The reason is that it weakens our trust in the gospel, and causes people to replace the work of Christ with human commitments instead of trusting in the power of the Spirit.

When someone doesn't understand that the power of the Christian life is the Spirit working within us through faith, they will use rules and the law to try to compensate. However, willpower can never compensate for the lack of reliance on the Holy Spirit.

When I explain this, there are some objections based on misunderstood passages in the Bible. These passages are usually taught as a warning of God's anger, so people naturally say, "If sin doesn't cause God's wrath to return upon the Christian, then what about this scripture?" In this section, I want to answer the 'but what about,' questions. Two of the most difficult passages are found in Hebrews 6 and Hebrews 10.

I once gave my testimony about how I struggled with an addictive sin, and it caused me to fall away from God, even to the point where I stopped going to church for 3-4 years. Afterwards, a man came up to me and said, "Your testimony is false. Because you fell away after you received salvation, you can't ever be forgiven again."

I said, "Look at my life now. It wasn't the devil that transformed me. If God could never forgive me, then why did He change my life?"

"All I know," he said as he patted his bible, "is that MY Bible says that if you fall away, you can NEVER be renewed again to repentance." He strongly emphasized 'my' and 'never'.

I'll admit that I was a little confused because of the scripture he was quoting. Yet, I had gone from a frustrating life of struggle

and failure, to an amazing relationship with God. I knew the Lord was working in my life, had given me a love for the scriptures, and each time I studied the Bible, I walked away with a deeper understanding and a stronger faith. My spiritual life was growing in amazing ways.

There has to be something wrong with this interpretation, I thought. It would be many years before I would find the answers. One thing I knew was that I had been mired in a sin I could not overcome, and now I was free. I had been incapable of changing my life, and in a moment, God changed everything.

The same passages that had been used to challenge my faith more than twenty years ago is still being taught today in a way that overthrows the faith of many Christians, instead of building it. Let's look at these passages so we can build our faith with a right understanding of the Bible.

Impossible to be Renewed

Let's look at the often misunderstood passage where this teaching originates, **Hebrews 6:4-8**:

⁴ For *it is impossible* for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit,

⁵ and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come,

⁶ if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put *Him* to an open shame.

⁷ For the earth which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it, and bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessing from God;

⁸ but if it bears thorns and briars, *it is rejected* and near to being cursed, whose end *is* to be burned.

Let's first consider the target audience of this passage. This comes from the book of Hebrews and is a letter written to the Hebrew (or Jewish) Christians shortly after the resurrection of Christ. At the birth of the church, Christianity began with Jewish believers, and then went to the Gentiles (or non-Jews) as described in the book of Acts.

Jewish Christians endured a lot of persecution, which often included being disowned by their families, and being imprisoned and even killed. The Apostle Paul began as a Pharisee, who was on his way to a foreign city to arrest fellow Jews who had turned to Christ. Paul believed that Christianity was a threat to the Jewish

religion. While in route to arrest Jewish Christians and disrupt a church in Damascus, he had a direct encounter with Christ. As a result, Paul's life was transformed, and the preacher-killer became a preacher of the faith he had been persecuting.

Hebrew (or Jewish) Christians are the target audience for the book of Hebrews. They were being pressured to compromise. The culture of that day permitted Jews to participate in other religions as long as they kept certain ordinances of the Old Testament law. The problem is that the Old Testament law pointed to Christ. The Bible says that the law was our teacher, who brought us to Christ, but once Christ came, there was no longer a need of the tutor that pointed to Him.⁸⁷

At this point, it was a denial of Christ to participate in the law. The law demanded a sacrificial lamb to atone for sin, but that lamb was a foreshadow of the Lamb of God, Jesus.⁸⁸ Once Jesus became the sacrifice, there was no need of an animal sacrifice, for it pointed to Him. To sacrifice a lamb was to openly declare that Jesus sacrifice was not accepted as God's provision for sin.⁸⁹

We should take a moment to break down the passage above. There is a lot of debate as to whether this is referring to the believer, or someone who is just exploring Christianity as a possible option. One key phrase makes this unmistakable – they are 'partakers of the Holy Spirit.' Only the Christian has the right to be a partaker of the Holy Spirit. Each time 'partaker' is mentioned in the Bible, it is the believer in Christ who is being discussed.

Hebrews 13:10 says that even those who are doing service in the temple have no right to be partakers with the believer in Christ! There isn't any wiggle room here. This passage is addressing Jews who have entered Christ by faith. However, this warning isn't a message of condemnation as many believe it to be.

The issue here is NOT that a Christian fell into sin. Hebrews 6 begins with instructing these Jewish Christians not to lay again the foundation of repentance from dead works. Do not attempt to lay the foundation again, or as the Bible says, "No other foundation can be laid other than Jesus Christ."⁹⁰ You can't re-lay the foundation of Christ. All you can do is attempt to lay again the old foundation, which puts Christ to an open shame by denying His work. This passage is addressing the compromise of Jewish Christians who were giving into the cultural pressure to turn back to the law that was fulfilled by Christ.

⁸⁷ Galatians 3:24-25

⁸⁸ John 1:29

⁸⁹ Galatians 5:4

⁹⁰ 1 Corinthians 3:11

Romans 10:4 says that Jesus is the end of the law of righteousness to anyone who believes, so to turn back to the law that ended in fulfillment in Christ is to openly proclaim that His completed work is insufficient, which makes it ‘common’, or no different than any other religious practice.

Hebrews 6:2 warns against returning to the ‘laying on of hands’. The ‘laying on of hands’ is not referring to the New Testament ordinance of laying hands over the sick or those being ordained. It is referring to the Old Testament practice where the head of the family would present a lamb to the priest. He would then lay his hands on the lamb as a symbolic transference of sin to the lamb. The lamb was then killed as a judgment for sin while the sinner walked free. This was a symbolic ordinance of what Christ would do on the cross, where our sins were laid on Him, so we can be free and declared righteous.

The Old Testament practice only temporarily atoned for sin by pushing it forward until the true Lamb came, Jesus Christ. Then the Bible says that Jesus paid for sin ‘once and for all’. Turning back to a system of judgment is denying Christ.

We don’t continue to lay the foundation of repentance from dead works (works of the law which brings death⁹¹), or to question the power of the resurrection, or to lay again a foundation upon the law, which every believer has been set free of when we came to Christ. We are called to leave these elementary things and go on toward perfection – which is growing in our faith and understanding of walking in the Spirit.

But what if we failed in these things? What does it mean that we can’t be renewed to repentance if we turn back to the law? Remember that these Christians were being tempted to mix law and grace. They were being falsely taught that they had to keep the law, and most did not understand this was a denial of Christ. The purpose of this passage is not to tell them that God was now damning them to eternal judgement for being misled.

They thought they were keeping the law, but in reality, they were attempting to lay again the foundation of repentance through the Old Testament sacrificial system, but they have fallen away from Christ to do so. They are entering a system that the Bible says cannot remove sin.⁹² Therefore, it is impossible for those in this law system to be renewed through repentance. A law system that now is a denial of Christ can never be used to return to Christ. Instead,

⁹¹ 2 Corinthians 3:7-9

⁹² Hebrews 10:4

they are near to cursing. The reason? Scripture teaches that the curse is by the law.⁹³

Jesus ended the curse, and anyone entering the law is entering the very curse that Jesus died to remove. It is therefore impossible to be renewed to repentance through the law.

The Bible makes the comparison between a fruitful field and one that is producing briars and thorns. There is no fruit from the thorny field. When a field is overgrown with thorns, the farmer will burn the field to remove the thorns and kill the weeds. Then he will cultivate the ground with good seed.

In the same way, God will allow the law to destroy your religion and self-effort works system. The only thing that will come from this is dead works. The Bible says that we build upon the foundation of Christ, but if anyone builds on this foundation works that are not of God, they will be destroyed by God's fire.⁹⁴ Even then, the person who produces these valueless works will be saved, for they will survive the fire because they are the work of God – even if their personal works aren't.

Therefore, this passage is not saying that God will take away your eternal life, for eternal can't be ended. It is warning that if a Christian lives in the curse of sin and death (which is what this passage in Hebrews is intended to reveal), then they are denying Christ and there are indeed consequences. All the works will be lost and the life built on these works will suffer ruin. God will even burn up these false religious works now so that we can begin again. Even so, the destruction of false works does not nullify the work of Christ in our lives.

This passage is not warning that you will be lost if you fall back into sin. The warning is that we walk in the calling of faith and not to turn back to the wasteland of religion and human effort.

As you can see, this passage is not teaching that sin will cause God to abandon you. It is a call to escape hopeless religion and to turn back to the life given to us in Christ.

The Willful Sin

Another problem passage is also found in Hebrews. This passage is often taught that 'presumptuous' or 'willful' sins can't be forgiven. The teaching of presumptuous sins is that when a person sins intentionally, presuming that God will forgive them, it is trampling Jesus' sacrifice underfoot. The below passage in Hebrews is used to scare people out of sinning. The problem is that

⁹³ Galatians 3:10 and 3:13

⁹⁴ 1 Corinthians 3:11-15

using the human will to fight against human desire is a losing effort, for if we were capable of ‘willing ourselves’ out of sin, then the law would have been effective. Yet even the Bible says that the law was ineffective because of the weakness of the flesh.⁹⁵

Unfortunately, sin by definition is when our will is in conflict with God’s will, and we choose our own. Every sin is willful because it is always the act of our will choosing the desire of the flesh over God’s will for us. With this in mind, let’s read **Hebrews 10:26-29**:

²⁶ For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,

²⁷ but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.

²⁸ Anyone who has rejected Moses’ law dies without mercy on *the testimony of two or three witnesses*.

²⁹ Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?

Once again, we need to ask ourselves, “Who is this being written to? Who is the target audience?”

It is Hebrew (or Jewish) Christians. When this passage is taken out of context, it can be used to teach what was never intended, and instead of building confidence in the completed work of Christ, it is often used to overthrow confidence and undermine faith in Him. The focus then shifts from ‘what Christ has done’ to ‘what we have done’, which is a major error in the teaching of many.

To understand what is being taught in the passage above, we need to look at how the chapter begins. Look at **Hebrews 10:1-4**:

¹ For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, *and* not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect.

² For then would they not have ceased to be offered? For the worshipers, once purified, would have had no more consciousness of sins.

³ But in those *sacrifices there is* a reminder of sins every year.

⁹⁵ Romans 8:3

⁴ For *it is* not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins.

The book of Hebrews is making the argument that turning back to the law is the equivalent of leaving Christ and submitting to the shadow that preceded Him.

The sacrificial system in the law pointed to the coming work of Christ, yet even those who kept the law were not justified. Their sins were never removed, for it is impossible for the blood of bulls and rams to take away sins. The purpose of these sacrifices was to remind the worshipper every year that they were under sin, the wages of sin is death, and that God is the one who takes care of sin. The final sacrifice would be the blood of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ.

There was always a consciousness of sin under the law because sin was never removed. Yet under Christ, the sacrifice was once and for all. Every sin was atoned for on the cross – even the sins that were not yet committed. It was sin as a whole that was defeated and removed through Christ. That is why that when Jesus arrived, the Bible says, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”⁹⁶

You were not even born yet, but God paid for your sin on the cross. God does not have to deal with your sins as you commit them, nor does He deal with sin as people come to Him. People enter into the eternal work of Christ and receive what was already accomplished on the cross.

Some go as far as to say that we are forgiven when we come to Christ, but we are judged for the sins we commit after we become a Christian. If that were true, the New Covenant would be no better than the Old Covenant, and Christ’s death would be a common thing, for it would be no different than any other religious effort.

If sin returned us to condemnation, no one could be saved. Because of this, the church does the same thing the Pharisees used to do. They dumbed down the law by elevating the laws they could keep, and turning a blind eye to the sins that affected them. Religion created a sin-scale, but to God, sin is sin, and even under the law we are warned that if we offend in one area, sin puts us under the condemnation of the whole law. No one under the law can escape condemnation.

Christians who try to merge the law with grace must do the same thing as the Pharisees did. They devalue the sins they cannot avoid to make themselves feel righteous, while condemning those with the ‘bad sins’ they feel should be judged. Yet according to the

⁹⁶ John 1:29

Bible, whatever is not of faith is sin,⁹⁷ therefore, every action or inaction that is not based completely on faith in Christ is sin. If the 'willful sin' doctrine were true, we are all back under condemnation.

Ironically, the very act of believing that sin still has power over the Christian is not of faith, so believing in the willful sin actually would put us under the very condemnation we are trying to avoid.

Thankfully, this is not even close to what this passage is teaching. The key to understanding this is verse 29, which tells us that the sin is to consider the blood of Christ's sacrifice as a common thing, and thus insulting the Spirit of Grace.

This passage is teaching that when Jewish believers were going back to the sacrificial law, they were actually putting Jesus' sacrifice on the same level as the animal sacrifices that pointed to Him. In other words, His sacrifice was a common thing, no different than that of a bull or ram.

Add to this, once someone put themselves back under a sacrificial system, there was no freedom from sin, but a fearful expectation of judgment. Why? Because the blood of bulls and rams can NEVER take away sins. If sin can't be removed through an animal, then there is never confidence of forgiveness, but the expectation of judgment. And this is rightly so, for if sin remains, so does judgment.

The Bible is warning these Hebrew Christians that if they willfully turn back to the sacrificial law, they are sinning against Christ. Verse 18 states that because of the remission of sin, there is no longer an offering for sin, for it is no longer needed. The next few verses explain that we can now draw near to God with confidence, and have full assurance that our sins and consciences have been cleared so we can have perfect fellowship with God. Now we are commanded to hold fast to our confidence in our confession, which is our declaration of trust in Christ's work for us. Since there is no more sacrifice for sins, the sacrifice itself was the willful sin.

So, you can see from the context of this passage, this does not even apply to the Christian today, for there is no sacrificial system in place. The only application this has for us is to remind us that sin has been removed and that Christ should always be our confidence. Any work of human effort is merely an attempt to replace Christ's work with our own.

It's sad that a passage intended to make us confident in the sufficiency of Christ is being used to overthrow confidence and create fear. As long as you don't decide to sacrifice animals to atone

⁹⁷ Romans 14:23

for your sin, you cannot be under the warning of Hebrews 10:26. Here is the passage you are under – **1 John 4:16-19**

¹⁶ And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.

¹⁷ Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world.

¹⁸ There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.

¹⁹ We love Him because He first loved us.

If you know and believe (trust) in the love of God, His perfect love casts out all fear. Even on the day of judgment, you will have boldness – and no fear. Why? Because sin has been removed and your trust is in Christ victory, which is a gift of love to you.

Discussion Questions

Does the fear of wrath produce lasting change in the Christian's life? Explain why or why not.

Review Hebrews 6:4-8.

Who is the target audience?

What does it mean that they cannot be renewed to repentance?
Is this passage teaching that sin causes Christians to be lost and abandoned by God?

What is the purpose of this passage?

Review Hebrews 10:1-4, and 26-29.

Explain what a willful sin is.

Who is the target audience of the book of Hebrews?

In verse 29, what does it mean to trample the Son of God underfoot and count His sacrifice as a common thing?

Read Hebrews 6:18-23

Why is there no more offering for sin?

In verse 22 and 23, we are told to be confident and draw near to God. What does this tell you about the purpose of the warning in verse 26?

Review 1 John 4:16-19

Is this contradictory or complementary to Hebrews 6?

Why does our belief in God's love cast out all fear?

What is the main point you have learned while studying the passages in this chapter?

The Veil Was Torn

Most of the confusion surrounding the Christian life and how to interpret scripture is caused by not understanding the difference between the old and new covenants. It's vital that the two not be mixed.

When the Bible writes to one of the seven churches in Revelation chapter 3, a warning is given about being lukewarm. The traditional church teaching is that God hates a Christian who is not on fire for Christ, and will reject them by spewing that person out of His mouth. The belief is that hot is tolerable, cold is tolerable, but lukewarm is revolting.⁹⁸

The truth is that God does not reject us because we can't stay 'fired up'. The easiest way to spot incorrect teaching is this: does it call us to put our trust in Christ's finished work? Or does it depend upon what we do for God? Truth calls us to trust in Christ and learn to walk in the power of the Spirit. Man-focused religion teaches that we must do something right in order to gain God's approval or acceptance.

We are called to learn how to walk in faith, putting all our confidence in Christ and His completed work.

What God warned about was not lukewarm religious activities. It was a warning about mixing the Old Covenant with the New Covenant. The Old Covenant was written on cold stone tablets, and according to the Bible, this covenant administered death.⁹⁹ A dead person is cold and founded upon the cold, uncaring stone tablets of the law. The law is cold. It doesn't show compassion. It only asks if you are perfect or guilty.

The New Covenant was founded upon Christ, who showed care and compassion for sinners. His work took the judgment of the law upon Himself, and then we are given life because we are in Him. It is for this reason that we are baptized into Christ's death to escape sin, and then baptized with the Spirit so the power of Christ may reside in us. The New Covenant started with fire! John the Baptist was sent to prepare the way of Christ. He said, "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." John was pointing to Christ.

After Jesus' resurrection, He instructed His people to stay together in the upper room and wait for the power of God. Then on the day when the church was officially born, the Holy Spirit came in as tongues of fire and rested upon them. Then the people who

⁹⁸ Revelation 3:14-16

⁹⁹ 2 Corinthians 3:7

had been timid and powerless went out and taught with boldness and power.

The normal Christian life has the power of the Spirit already, but once it is diluted with man's religious works, it becomes a powerless religion. An interesting thing happens when you take a new believer, who is excited about their walk of faith, and teach them that they must add the law to their faith in Christ. The fire goes out. They still have the fire of the Spirit deep within, but because their minds are focused on the coldness of the law, they become lukewarm.

It is this lukewarm teaching that God rejects. The Spirit will not operate through the law. The New Covenant will not operate in the Old Covenant. Once you mix the old with the new, it becomes lukewarm at best.

The Old Testament was based on the covenant of the law. The word 'covenant' means: an agreement between two parties, or a legal contract.

The old covenant had a weakness – mankind. According to the Bible, the old covenant was designed to reveal to people like you and I that we are incapable of fulfilling the law, because it demanded perfection.

Unfortunately, the majority of traditional teaching in the church is based on the erroneous belief that the Christian should have the power to keep the old law. Yet since man was the weakness of the law, it was impossible to fulfill it. According to the Bible, the former covenant was annulled through Christ because of its weakness.¹⁰⁰ The law made nothing perfect. However, God took upon Himself the act of perfecting the believer through the power of the cross. Now we stand with hope through the work of Christ bringing in the new covenant, which gives us the power to draw near to God as His children without fear or doubting.¹⁰¹ Doubts only arise when the work of Christ is out of focus.

Let's simplify this. The law reveals sin by measuring our lives against God's perfect standard. It was never intended to make the sinner perfect, but to reveal to the sinner that he or she is not perfect. This forces us to look away from ourselves and to Christ, where He makes us perfect in Him by removing the law, defeating the sinful nature that held us captive, and inviting us into His presence.

Sadly, most people live as though we are still separated from God unless we go through self-cleansing rituals to become

¹⁰⁰ Hebrews 7:18

¹⁰¹ Hebrews 7:19, Hebrews 10:22

accepted. However, God showed in no uncertain terms that this need was completely removed on the cross.

When Jesus was crucified, He looked up to heaven and in a loud voice cried out, “It is finished!” Then He said, “Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.” He bowed His head and died. Then an amazing thing happened. There was a great shaking of the earth and the veil of the temple was torn from the top to the bottom. This indicated that God was removing the wall of separation between us and Himself by tearing the veil from heaven downward to man.

The veil of the temple was the barrier between the holiest place of God and the people. It was the wall of separation between sinful man and a holy God. Only one man could enter the holiest place in the temple once per year – the High Priest. In order to enter, he had to go through many symbolic cleansing rituals, and then he would take the blood of a sacrificed lamb and sprinkle it on the altar as an offering for sin. This was symbolic of the wages of sin being death, but instead of the sinner dying, the lamb died in the sinner’s place.

Jesus is the Lamb of God who came to give His life as the perfect and permanent sacrifice for sin.¹⁰² Once the perfect sacrifice was made, there was no more need for an offering for sin, so there is no longer a barrier between God and man, and therefore, no need of a veil.

The people hadn’t changed. When the veil was torn by God, sinners were still out in the crowd, but because sin had been paid once and for all,¹⁰³ God now welcomed the sinner into His throne of grace!

Let’s stop for a moment and look at the symbol of the lamb. Most people don’t realize it, but the Old Testament is filled with laws and rituals that point to what Christ would one day accomplish for them. We can now look back at these symbolic rituals to gain a better understanding of what He has done.

Jesus is called, The Lamb of God. Once a year, God’s people were required to come to the temple to have their sins covered for the upcoming year. They would bring a lamb that was spotless and without flaws. The priest would examine the lamb for blemishes, and if none were found, he would approve the sacrifice. The head of the family would then lay his hands on the lamb as a symbol of transferring his sins to the lamb. The lamb was then slain and his blood was put on the altar of God to cover the sins of the people.

¹⁰² John 1:19, Revelation 5:12, Revelation 13:8

¹⁰³ Hebrews 7:27, Hebrews 9:12, Hebrews 10:10

When the lamb was brought forth, it was the lamb that was examined for perfection – not the sinner. The people walked away free because the lamb was determined to be a worthy sacrifice.

In the same way, God does not examine you for sins. God examines the Lamb of God, who is Jesus Christ. Because Jesus was examined and found faultless, you are declared free. Jesus was slain on the cross for your sins, and you walk away guiltless.

This is why the Bible says that Jesus became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.¹⁰⁴ Jesus wasn't guilty because He sinned, but because He received your sin. In the same way, you aren't guiltless because you acted righteous, but because you received His righteousness by faith. Jesus became sin because man declared sin upon Him, and God accepted it. You become perfect because God declares His righteousness upon you, and you accept it.

This is why it's time to stop saying, "I'm a sinner saved by grace," and start saying, "I was a sinner, but have been transformed by grace."

When the Apostle Peter was questioning God about receiving unclean things, God said, "What God has cleansed you must not call unclean." This interaction with Peter is a great example of the change of covenants.

In the Old Testament law, God declared many animals as unclean. The Jewish people were strictly forbidden to eat anything declared to be unclean. Not only that, but the people around the Jews were considered to be unclean. A Jew was not permitted to dine with a gentile (or non-Jew). After Jesus was crucified, the church was born, and it began with the Jews. The people still thought in terms of the Old Covenant, but God was about to change that old mindset.

God sent several gentile men to ask for Peter because God was about to introduce the gospel to the non-Jewish world. Knowing that Peter would not understand this, God gave Peter a vision of food consisting of everything the Old Testament forbade the Jews to eat. Then God commanded Peter to eat it. Peter said, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean."

This vision to Peter was God preparing him to accept the gentiles whom God had sent to invite Peter into their home to hear the gospel. Peter was now getting the understanding that Jesus was not merely a Jewish messiah, but that He was the Savior of the whole world.

God then instructed Peter to go with these men, even though the Old Covenant forbid him to abide in the home of a non-Jew.

¹⁰⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:21

Peter was now commanded to not call the people God was cleansing through the gospel common (or unclean). Jews and Gentiles were now in the same covenant of grace.

For the Jew, God removed the law written on stone, and replaced it with the ministry of the Spirit within them, and now has declared that they are no longer condemned by the law because sin has now been cleansed. For the Gentile outside the law, they were now cleansed by that same Spirit, and we were now one Church.

The law was called the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones.¹⁰⁵ The law had glory, but that glory faded when the greater glory came, the ministry of the Spirit, written on our hearts.¹⁰⁶ This was even foretold in an Old Testament passage I have referenced several times already, **Ezekiel 36:26-27**:

²⁶ "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

²⁷ "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do *them*.

The old covenant said, "You must do," the new covenant says, "I[God] will do." The old way was that you must try to make your unclean heart act in a clean manner. The new covenant says that God takes away the old sinful nature, and gives you a new spirit, which is born of God, and then He will cause us to walk in His ways. Our only role is to walk by faith. It is a life that is focused on fellowship with God, instead of focusing on laws and rules.

Now you approach God from a position of already having been cleansed, instead of the old way of having to try to be cleansed so you can have a moment of cleanliness. **1 Corinthians 6:11** says:

But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.

Now that you are cleansed, you must not call yourself unclean, for you cannot undo the work of God. Your weaknesses do not have the power to overthrow the victory of Christ. Your sins cannot defeat Jesus' righteousness in you.

And this becomes the greatest point of contention thrown against the way of faith. Does this mean I can sin freely? If my sins cannot defeat God's righteousness, won't this belief cause people to sin more?

¹⁰⁵ 2 Corinthians 3:7

¹⁰⁶ 2 Corinthians 3:7-9

Does telling people that they are free to gather food from a dumpster cause more people to go dumpster diving? Of course not. Only someone at risk of starvation desires to eat trash, but we have the table of God where we can eat freely. We can eat trash freely, or eat good things freely. The only reason someone would want trash would be because they have not yet learned that they have something better.

It's not shaming someone out of the dumpster that pleases God. It is teaching people that they are free to dine in God's presence that pleases Him. Instead of teaching that God is the great scorner of sinners, we should be teaching that God is the great deliverer who rescues them from sin.

Without faith it is impossible to please God.¹⁰⁷ The Bible also says that the just shall live by faith.¹⁰⁸ Throughout the Bible, we are explicitly told that all things of God are received by faith. This goes for His promises, His protection, His gifts, and His righteousness. It is also true about His power to subdue sin. The promise we live in was given as far back as the Old Testament, when God promised to not only forgive our sins, but we are promised that He, God, will subdue our iniquities.¹⁰⁹ In other words, God will take the sinful tendencies that once haunted us, and He will subdue them.

The problem is that the church really doesn't believe this promise, so we push the Spirit aside and try to do it in our own power – even though we have a lifetime of failure behind our flawed personal efforts. People get frustrated with religion because we are constantly told to try harder. When we fall again, we are scolded and told to try even harder. Christianized religion has become a cycle of insanity. We do the same thing, the same way, and expect a different result. When it doesn't work, we are taught to double our efforts, which only brings us to the same place again, but more tired and frustrated than before.

Even though sin abounds more in the church than ever before, we still are committed to a man-based effort system that cannot succeed. We call it God-based, but the strength comes from ourselves as we try to make ourselves acceptable to God. God doesn't honor our efforts because we are pushing His work aside, and replacing it with human-effort-based religion.

This can be clearly seen by looking at the strictest religious sects among us. The more legalistic and demanding a group gets, the more sin creeps in. It is shamed more, so people put on a religious face. Hypocrisy is more acceptable in the church than true

¹⁰⁷ Hebrews 11:6

¹⁰⁸ Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, Hebrews 10:38

¹⁰⁹ Micah 7:19

faith. The reason is that the church feels better about sin if they are condemning it. Those bound by legalism don't overcome personal sin, but instead focus on the sins of others, and use outward condemnation to drown out inward condemnation.

The concept of outgrowing sin is incomprehensible because faith has been replaced by church rules. Instead, we should place our faith in Christ and in the power of the Spirit.

The Bible even warns of this when we are told, "The law entered that the offense might abound, but where sin abounded, grace abounded much more."¹¹⁰ The law causes sin to increase so that the person outside of Christ is made to understand that righteousness has to come from something other than themselves. But when the church teaches that we need more law to attack the abounding sin instead of resting in Christ, people have nowhere to look for relief.

We don't trust the promise that the Spirit can subdue our sins, so we never experience what it truly means to walk in freedom and victory. The truth is that victory is a guarantee – but only when we are walking in God's abounding power by faith.

The Bible says that God's divine power has given us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of Christ.¹¹¹ We are told to receive from God's power, and learn how to add these promises to our lives by faith. And if we do these things, we have this promise:

For if these things are yours and abound, you will neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. **(2 Peter 1:8)**

We are also promised that when we walk in this truth, "You will never stumble."¹¹² Even Jesus taught the disciples that the only way to live the abundant life He offered was to abide in Him. Jesus even warned, "For without Me, you can do nothing."¹¹³ This includes trying to live for God. Without the power of Christ, this is impossible.

The Christian life is not about doing things for God, or changing our lives for God. It is about learning how to know and believe in His love, and discovering the abounding gifts provided to us through the power of His love toward us. As we learn about Him, we are learning how to walk by faith. This is why the Bible says that faith comes by hearing the word of God.¹¹⁴ An important part of

¹¹⁰ Romans 5:20

¹¹¹ 2 Peter 1:3

¹¹² 2 Peter 2:10

¹¹³ John 15:5

¹¹⁴ Romans 10:17

hearing the word is having the scriptures rightly divided so the young believer can learn how to discern the truth.

The heart of the problem is NOT a sin problem. The reason each of us struggles is not because we have too much desire for sin. Sin is NOT the problem. We know this because the Bible says that we have been freed from sin, and that sin has no power over us. Focusing on sin is the worst thing a Christian can do. This is true whether you are focusing on the desire of temptation, or focusing on sin in order to generate condemnation.

The problem is our value system. When real treasure has never been seen, trash looks like treasure.

Let me give an example. King Solomon was the richest king in history. The nation prospered so much during his reign, the Bible makes an interesting statement. When talking about the drinking vessels, the Bible says that they all were made of gold, and not one was silver. The reason? “Not one was silver, for this was accounted as nothing in the days of Solomon.”

Gold was so abundant that silver was counted as worthless! Yet if you were to go into the nations around them, silver was greatly valued. In fact, before Solomon’s reign, silver was a treasure as well. But once gold took its place, silver was pushed aside. No one had to pry it out of anyone’s hand. They tossed it aside as nothing.

Their value system changed because something of greater value caused them to change the way they looked at the things they once treasured.

This is true for sin. We desire sin because we value its promises. Though sin’s promises are empty and fleeting, it still looks like a treasure, so we pursue it. People pursue religion’s promises because of the hope of obtaining a treasure or reward. People labor their whole lives pursuing the empty promises of self-righteousness, self-glorification, and self-worth. People pursue sin because of the promises of self-satisfaction, self-gratification, and self-gain. Whether pursuing self-based religious practices, or sin, they are false promises that draw our focus away from the treasure of Christ.

The empty promises of religion appear valuable because the abundance provided through faith has never been discovered. Sin’s empty promises of gratification seems valuable because the treasure of our abundant life remains undiscovered. When someone has never discovered the treasure of the life of fellowship with God, every worthless thing seems valuable.

Spiritual poverty causes people to explore the dumpsters of life, believing that trash is treasure.

The Apostle Paul looked back at his life and said that the things he once thought were profitable, he now counts as trash.¹¹⁵ He later said that he has discovered that godliness with contentment is great gain.¹¹⁶

Paul's behavior and pursuits changed when his value system changed. Paul counted his old life's pursuits as trash for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ, and he cast away the trash so that he could gain the true treasure, Christ!¹¹⁷

No one had to tell Paul to change his life. No one shamed him into changing his behavior. Quite the opposite. Even though Paul was using religion to destroy others, his religious community rewarded and promoted Paul because of his religious fervor. After God transformed his heart through the gospel of grace, that same religious community condemned, accused, and persecuted Paul because of his new focus on Christ. Because he now saw the value of his new life, nothing could persuade him to turn back. In his past, Paul did many terrible things that once seemed justifiable, but when he saw the true treasure, everything else seemed worthless.

He did not force himself to do righteous acts. He did not force himself to stop sinning. When his value system changed, he left sin behind and naturally desired the things of God.

Let's return to the earlier question. Will we sin more if we believe the promises that all sin has been removed through Christ? The answer to that question depends on your value system. If you continue to value sin, then yes, you will sin freely and continue to invest yourself in the dumpsters of the flesh. But when you discover that sin is trash and has no value, and you discover that fellowship with God has great value, then sin will begin to fall away without you forcing yourself into a rule system. In fact, the rule system cannot do what the freedom of grace can. Only grace can defeat sin. Rules can only curb sin while there is a threat of consequences strong enough to temporarily restrain that person.

You need to stop worrying about sin. Even when you blow it, you still have the freedom to step out of sin and walk directly to God's throne of grace without fear or condemnation. The religious mind squirms at this thought, but this is the only way to truly escape the old fleshly ways of thinking.

The real victory begins to be realized when you slowly begin to learn to trust in the fellowship of grace God purchased for you with His own blood. God NEVER examines you for sin, nor does he look for your perfection. God invites you to become a partaker of

¹¹⁵ Philippians 3:7

¹¹⁶ 1 Timothy 6:6

¹¹⁷ Philippians 3:8

His nature, and as you learn to take from Him and receive the life of the Spirit, sin will begin falling away. You are invited to step into His perfection.

You will be learning how to walk in the Spirit – which is to walk by faith as you continue to learn of Christ. Meditate on this amazing passage, **2 Peter 1:3-4**

³ His divine power has given to us all things that *pertain* to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue,

⁴ by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption *that is* in the world through lust.

It is through the knowledge of Christ that we discover how to escape from worldly thinking. The only thing you ‘must do’ is receive from Him. If you have received Christ, you have escaped the corruption of the lusts of this world. You don’t need to learn how to escape sin. You need to learn how to grow in the knowledge of Christ, which is where all our promises reside.

It’s God’s job to suppress your sins and temptations. It’s even God’s job to change your value system. It’s your job to learn how to trust in His promises. This especially includes when you fall into sin or fail in your walk of faith. Faith says, “You are not condemned, nor will God judge you when others condemn you.” Faith calls you to trust God when you know you don’t deserve it, for grace means that you are blessed without merit or doing anything to become worthy.

You are worthy because God declared you worthy. This occurred because He took your place, so you could stand in His righteousness. Faith is trusting the promise of grace over the condemnation of sin. Unbelief trusts in the power of sin. Faith believes that grace defeated sin, and we are blessed for no other reason than that we believe what God has declared to us and about us.

Discussion Questions

Read John 1:29. What sin is included or excluded from Jesus' work on the cross?

Read Hebrews 7:27, Hebrews 9:12, and Hebrews 10:10. According to these passages, how many times does the blood have to cover our sin?

What happens if we sin again?

Read 2 Peter 1:3-9.

According to verse 9, what causes people to miss these promises?

According to verse 3, are these spiritual attributes the work of personal effort?

What is meant by 'all things have been given to us for life and godliness'? If I lack spiritual growth, what must I do?

Read Luke 23:45-47. Why did God erect the veil in the Old Testament, but tear it down at Christ's death?

Were sinners viewing the holiest place of God?

Why did the Old Testament priests judge the sacrificial lamb instead of sinners as worthy or unworthy?

Why does the Bible call Jesus the Lamb of God?

What makes us righteous?

Confidence Out of Doubt

You may have heard that fear and doubt are sins. This is completely false. It is only when these two cause our hearts to abandon God's purpose that they become problems. God never condemns doubt. It is disbelief that falls into sin. Disbelief is when we allow fear to dictate our decisions. Disbelief is when we trust our doubts over God, and choose to allow our flesh to be our confidence instead of trusting in God's promise.

Even Jesus expressed doubts during His darkest hour. In Matthew 26:39-44 we see the perfect example for handling fear. Jesus faced the coming crucifixion. For His entire ministry, Jesus foretold of this hour and made it clear that this was His purpose. Yet when the time came, He prayed, "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me."

The cup was explained in Matthew 26:27. It's His crucifixion on the cross. This is where Jesus brought in the New Covenant where His blood gave us the remission of sins. The word 'remission' means to be released from bondage or imprisonment by removing the penalty.

Jesus was about to face the torment of the cross, where His blood would be shed for sin to purchase our freedom.

When that hour came, even though Jesus knew this was His purpose, He had to endure doubt. This was also necessary because the Bible says that Jesus was tempted in every way we are, yet without sin.¹¹⁸

When faced with doubt about the future, He prayed to escape His fate, yet Jesus always said, "But not My will, but Yours." As He submitted to obedience, Luke 22:43 gives an interesting additional bit of information, "An angel appeared to Him from heaven, strengthening Him."

Even after receiving new strength, Jesus prayed more earnestly the same things. As He wrestled with His flesh, He was also growing stronger in the Spirit. Jesus knew this would be the case, which is why He took three of His disciples. Jesus gave them the warning, "Watch and pray lest you enter into temptation. The spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak."

This will always be the case. Even though we are willing to walk this Christian life, the flesh is incapable of overcoming. So, if we are in the flesh, we cannot stand when temptation is greater than human strength.

The disciples were not spiritually prepared, so when the great challenge to their faith arose, they all fled. Faith failed them

¹¹⁸ Hebrews 4:15

because their faith was based on self and their strength was dependent upon the flesh. Jesus wrestled against the call of the flesh and escaped its weakness by submitting to God's will. Through seeking the Father's will in prayer, Jesus turned His focus away from the flesh and placed His mind in the Spirit.

The flesh seeks to indulge itself by focusing on immediate wants, and to also escape trials and discomfort. The Spirit overcomes the flesh and through the Spirit, we can face any circumstance knowing that God is leading us toward what is truly good. The flesh views good based on short-term thinking and eyes that can rarely see through the immediate circumstance or problem. Yet the greatest good often requires us to walk through the valley of trials, knowing that we are being led to victory, regardless of the threat of defeat. Jesus could never have had the victory of resurrection without the defeat of the cross. However, what defeated the flesh produced life in the Spirit, which was then able to resurrect the flesh with new life.

Jesus did not deny His doubts – He faced them head on. Jesus humbled Himself to submit to the Spirit. He became weak in the flesh so He could receive strength through the Spirit. The disciples did not recognize that need, so their faith was depending on their own will, and not one of them stood. Yet Jesus, who seemed weak a few minutes before the mob of soldiers appeared, was strong in the presence of the greatest threat anyone could ever face.

This is why most people see their faith fail when they need it most. We tend to make ourselves the strength of our faith, and because the flesh is weak, our faith is limited.

I once met someone that taught me a lot about faith – from their negative example. They were very religious, almost to a fervor. But an interesting thing happened when they were faced with doubt. I witnessed a discussion where someone admitted they had doubts, and asked them how to answer a hard question. This person who constantly proclaimed their great faith said, "You have a disease called doubt. I have to separate from you or else I might catch this disease." Then they broke off all communication.

Is this faith? To hide from hard questions? The Bible says that faith is our shield, which quenches the darts of the wicked one.¹¹⁹ Yet this person was not being shielded by faith, but was becoming a shield for their self-produced faith. They were the shield, so the only way to escape harm was to flee.

Another example I discovered while reading through the 'testimonies' of several atheists. I noticed that most atheists in this group had come out of very religious homes. One atheist made a

¹¹⁹ Ephesians 6:16

telling statement when he said, “I just got tired of pretending. I didn’t have answers, only questions. I made myself believe for all those years until I just got tired of it. It was freeing to let go of the oppression of religion. I no longer had to make myself believe what I didn’t think was true.”

Sadly, as I communicated with this person, he was doing the same thing in atheism as he was doing in religion. He still had canned answers and didn’t know why he believed, but he echoed what his new religion was teaching him. It was just easier to be an atheist in college than a Christian, because no one challenged his beliefs in atheism.

Even so, this testimony is telling. We all struggle with doubts, the problem is that we either hide from doubts, or seek refuge in a different belief system – unless we find the courage to face them.

Early in my ministry, I got a lot of criticism from atheist because I believed in creation. I studied a lot from both sides and clearly the evidence supported creation. The only way evolution could stand up was to exclude any evidence that pointed to God by calling it ‘religious’. Yet when everything was examined together, evolution and atheism can’t stand up.

I could argue that point well because I had a lot of information from both sides. I read leading evolution proponents like Richard Dawkins, Carl Sagan, and others, as well as reading the creation side and comparing the two. When all the evidence was laid out, atheists would always fall back on mocking, name-calling, and rejecting anything that didn’t support their ideas. That never bothered me, but what did bother me was how they would criticize the Bible and point out inaccuracies.

The problem I faced was that in discussions, they would use what I called ‘machinegun fire questioning’. They would throw out so many questions that it would overwhelm the argument and make it hard to follow any line of reasoning to its conclusion. However, the fact that they had dozens of questions bothered me. As I would answer one question to myself, there were ten more. It was overwhelming. I realized that it wasn’t possible to answer hundreds and hundreds of objections, but I wanted to be confident in the Bible. So, I came up with an idea.

I went to my atheist friends in person and online and I asked a simple question. “If you could come up with one thing that you would say absolutely disproves the Bible, what would it be? Only one question though. What is the best evidence you have against the Bible?”

As you can imagine, there was no shortage of answers. I took every objection and compiled them. Keep in mind, this was for me. My goal wasn’t to win an argument with any atheist. In fact, I stopped debating on creation versus evolution, and other issues

because I learned that you can't argue anyone into faith. In my entire ministry, I have never had an atheist turn to Christ because I could present more evidence. But I did have an atheist tell me that he came to faith when he heard me talking about the love of God. That one statement caused me to re-evaluate the focus of my ministry.

I took every objection I received and went through them. A lot of the so-called contradictions were misunderstandings of the scriptures. Such as the Old Testament law says one thing, but the New Testament teaches differently. It wasn't surprising that my atheist friends did not comprehend the change of covenants and why the Old Laws pointed to what would be fulfilled in Christ. However, there were about 10 or 12 objections that I did not know the answers to. At first glance, these Bible objections were areas of doubt. But I said, "If the Bible is true, it will stand up to the scrutiny."

I spent a couple of months studying and researching. Some of the things took a lot of digging. Answering objections could be a book in itself, but one by one, I was able to find clear answers that satisfied my doubts. I was down to one difficult question that took many weeks to find. My last answer came from an online historical archive for Arabian history.

Ezekiel 29:12 has a warning of God that He will make the land of Egypt desolate for forty years. "There is no evidence for this, so it is a failed prophecy," one critic stated.

Actually, this was true. There was no evidence. There was an absence of evidence. There was an entry during the timeline of ancient Egypt that had explained a gap of forty to fifty years for a timeframe that matches the Bible's history. The entry stated, "We have no historical or archaeological data for this period of time."

If a country was desolate, that is exactly what you would expect to find – no evidence because there is no information. No one is record-keeping because the land is desolate.

This was the last and the hardest question for me to answer. While it is still impossible to answer an endless stream of criticism, it is also pointless to argue every criticism. No one is listening to the answers, and it's a waste of time to get bogged down. Jesus even warned not to throw pearls before swine, for they will do nothing except reject the pearls, and then attack you.¹²⁰ The Apostle Paul warned his disciple, Titus, not to get caught up with endless arguments, which are unprofitable. If someone doesn't listen after three attempts, walk away.¹²¹

¹²⁰ Matthew 7:6

¹²¹ Titus 3:10-11

For me, it was freeing to answer my doubts. If a dozen questions that represented the best arguments against the Bible were answered completely, then the hundreds of petty objections aren't worthy of my time. If the Bible stood up against the battering ram of criticism, I need not worry myself about the pebbles thrown incessantly. From that point on, my doubt was satisfied. I didn't pretend that the Bible has no flaws. I searched it myself and the Bible proved to be the word of truth.

I will admit that early on it was a struggle. I read through the Bible 30 – 40 times in a two-year period. My first couple of times through, some things did confuse me. Some things did seem contradictory. But as I began to see that the Old Testament was the tutor that brought us to Christ, and that He fulfilled the law, then what seemed like contradictions actually were foreshadows. They didn't point to what we must do, but what Christ would soon fulfill (and now has fulfilled).

The problem with doubt is that the church is taught to fear it, or that it is a sin. Because people are afraid of offending God, they pretend to not see doubt, or try to ignore that nagging feeling. Over time, it wears them down. Yet God often tells His people to test Him.

The Queen of Sheba came to King Solomon because it was claimed that the Lord's wisdom in him was unprecedented, so she came to test him with hard questions. Her questions proved God's gift of wisdom, and she stated that the rumors were not only true, but didn't give even half the picture of the wisdom Solomon had. The people of Berea heard the word of God, and were called more noble because they searched the scriptures to see if these things were true.

Gideon faced his doubts by testing the Lord. Even when God answered Gideon, the Lord knew he still struggled with doubt, so God sent him to the enemy's camp to see for himself. God allowed Gideon to overhear a conversation where a soldier in the opposing army testified that God was with Gideon and he would destroy his enemies. Then Gideon's confidence became strong.

Almost every person used by God in the Bible began their ministry with doubt and fear. Yet they stepped out in faith, trusting God to strengthen them over doubt and fear. Then God built their confidence over time until they became strong leaders. They weren't strong through self-confidence. They became strong through Christ-confidence. When you begin discovering God's call, there will always be doubts and questions, but as you learn of Him, you begin discovering your calling, and confidence grows as you learn to walk in faith.

Sometimes trust begins by answering the questions that keep nagging in our minds. Sometimes trust is built by small successes.

Sometimes God does something truly miraculous to build our confidence in Him. But we truly experience the fullness of our Christian walk as we learn how to trust God through our fellowship with Him, and stop being dependent on external circumstances.

One of my favorite examples of faith was George Mueller. He started off just like all of us, unsure of his purpose and God's plan, but once he discovered God's purpose, he became unshakeable. He felt God calling him to start an orphanage. There were many street children in England during the 1800s, and his heart yearned for them.

He started very humbly, but as God blessed his work, he became secure in his call. In the end, he built a campus with many dorms, which housed around 2,500 children. He had no budget, no organization supporting him, and no money in reserves.

God gave him a vision of the faithfulness of the Bible's promises, and that became the foundation of Mueller's calling. The main purpose of Mueller's mission was not to house orphans. His mission statement was that God could be trusted. He stated that he wanted to show people that God's promises are true and reliable. He made a commitment that he would never ask for money, but believe that God could supply all of his needs and the needs of his 2,500 children.

On one occasion, he had 2,500 kids at the dinner table, no food, and no money to buy food. His staff came to him in a near panic. "What are we going to do?" someone asked.

George said, "Nothing. This is God's problem. Have the kids bow and thank God for the food He has provided."

How can the kids thank God for God's provision when the tables were empty? But they did, and as the prayer was in progress, there was a knock on the door.

"Our truck broke down on the road," the man said. "We have food that is going to spoil. Do you think you all can make use of it?"

While everyone else was frustrated with the situation, God had grown George's faith to the point where this was the norm for him. There were times when they needed a specific amount of money to pay the expenses, and on one occasion, a nearby church came by and said, "We have been forgetting to check the donation box for your ministry. Today we opened it and brought it." It was the exact amount needed.

Mueller didn't start with these miracles. He learned to trust God over time. He never trusted in the money. Once when there was a big need for the orphanage, a woman came to him and offered money. He was aware of her debt and asked her if she had paid it off? When she said, "No. I felt led to give it to you," Mueller said, "That isn't your money to give. It belongs to your creditor," and he

refused the offering. It was an offering the ministry desperately needed at that moment.

Again, his staff worried, but Mueller gave it to God, and saw God's promise fulfilled. Without faith, he would never have seen the ministry of rescuing street children grow to the level that seems impossible – even by today's standards. The largest orphanage today holds 990 children and has a large government backing. When Mueller decided to test God's faithfulness, his ministry grew to more than two and a half times that, with no one backing him.

And this is a good example for us. Most of us are like his staff, stressing because God's provision is not seen. Then we want to take matters out of God's hands and handle it ourselves. It is a reasonable reaction. After all, sometimes Mueller's confidence seemed ill-advised. Sometimes God's provision came after it was too late. Or so it seemed.

Yet if he had taken control, he would never have seen these daily miracles. He would have never seen his primary mission fulfilled, to show people that God can be trusted. Period.

We let doubt create fear, and then we take things into our own hands and try to help God out. Or we abandon completely believing God won't do what He promised. However, sometimes God *will* wait until it's too late, because His power to provide is greater than our timeline.

How many works of God are never seen because we can't believe when things seem to be impossible? A good example of this can be seen in the Old Testament story of God's people entering the Promised Land.

Before God gave the promise to His people, He required faith. He rescued them from slavery without requiring faith. He proved His power to show them He could do it. The Egyptian army pursued them, and God opened the sea to reveal a bridge of escape. He did this while they were completely faithless. They escaped while God troubled the army until His people could get across. Then God destroyed the army with the words, "Take a look at your enemies, for you will never see them again."

God fed them in the desert, brought water out of a rock, protected them from enemies, and showed them His power – all without requiring faith. Then He took them to the promise, but tested their faith before they could receive it. God sent spies into the land who came back with a report. "Everything God said about the land was true. There is milk and honey in abundance." They brought back fruit from the land as evidence. But there was a problem.

There were armies of great stature, walled cities, and enemies that looked so big that they felt like grasshoppers in their sight. Then they said, "It is impossible to take the land."

Of course it was impossible. It was also impossible for them to escape slavery, cross the sea on dry land, and defeat the greatest army of that era in history. It was impossible for bread to fall from heaven and for water to spring out of a rock. God shows His power by making the impossible possible. He also makes it impossible to obtain the depths of His promise without faith. It is meant to be impossible for man, because it is not His people that fulfill the promise. It's God's job to fulfill the promise. In fact, God has already fulfilled every promise.

The Promised Land was already theirs, but it was unrealized for that generation. They allowed fear and doubt to become their trust, and they turned from God. They disbelieved His word, and all the journey to the point of promise was fruitless. That first generation never received the promise, but the next generation did.

The Bible says this event was for us to see as an example. God works in our lives to get us to the point of seeing His faithfulness and the greatness of what He has promised us. Then He makes it impossible for us to overcome by human effort. And there the wall remains until we trust Him. He either opens the door, or crushes the wall. However, that wall cannot fall until we are in faith.

Our example in the Promised Land is that when the next generation stepped toward the promise, it was again impossible. The giants were still in the land, and another obstacle was present. It was flood season, and the Jordan River overflowed its banks. There was no way to cross. No bridge, no ropes, and certainly no one swimming across a raging river. But God gave them a foolish command. Step into the river.

The priest carrying the ark (which is a picture of Christ being with them) stepped into the river. Or at least they tried to. An odd thing happened. When their toes touched the water, it receded. God sent something upstream to block the river, and it stood in a heap until they all crossed over.

And this is the call of faith. We begin by God revealing Himself to us, and He begins to show Himself strong as He calls us to follow. But when it comes to seeing His promise fulfilled in our life, faith is required. God gives us the gift of faith, and then calls us to trust in Him over the flesh.

Those who can't believe go back into the desert of life, having never seen the greatness of God. However, those few people who step out in faith, even at their own peril, see the impossible.

This is why so few Christians ever see the power of God. We may have moments where God works and sometimes this is amazing. But real faith calls us to believe without seeing. Faith is the evidence if things hoped for, and the assurance of things not yet

seen.¹²² God's word reveals Himself to us with the call to grow closer to Him. Then our relationship reveals God's personal call. God grows us to the point where we should know we can trust Him, even when circumstances look impossible.

Our circumstances may be a trial, obstacle, or a call to action that does not yet seem possible. We will be ill-equipped, feel inadequate, and not have the resources needed. Or the trial may be bigger than we are, stronger than we are, and have us in its power. Yet God calls us to hope (or trust in the reality of His promise) and be confident that we already have what we have not yet seen.

Like the Promised Land, it was already theirs. God had already fulfilled the promise, but they never saw its reality because they could only see the obstacles before them. Yet the next generation saw the promise because they followed God and saw every enemy and every wall fall. Everything exceeded their strength, but God showed every battle belong to Him. They were only called to follow Him, even when it didn't make sense.

God's promises to you are already fulfilled and are a reality. God's call for you is already accomplished, for the Bible says, "We were created for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."

It is already yours for you to walk in, experience God, and be blessed for the good works God prepared for you to accomplish through Him. However, most never see the reality of the promise because their hope is abandoned when they put more trust in circumstances instead of the Lord.

The way of the Christian life is not difficult. It is impossible. Yet it is a burden that Jesus promised to bear when He said, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." A yoke is how two oxen were joined together to plough a field. We are yoked to Christ, but it is not we who bear the weight of the work, but Him. Our burden is light, for we are simply learning to walk with Him as we step in faith. The primary focus of works is not the work, but God's invitation of walking with Him. God uses the call of our personal ministry to cultivate our fellowship with Him. It's never about accomplishing the work, but learning how to trust God and walk with Him as we explore the abundant life He prepared for us to discover.

When we take the work upon ourselves, it will be too heavy for us to bear. When we see challenges greater than ourselves, if we forget that it is His responsibility to conquer every challenge, and our job to walk by faith, if we lose sight of this, we will unyoke from Him. Then we will either fail in our efforts, or turn back to find an

¹²² Hebrews 11:1

easier way. Yet any way outside of Him is a human work that will never be acceptable to God.

Having said all of this, remember that doubt does not disqualify you from faith. The people of God may have doubted what would happen when they stepped into the raging river, but they still trusted God and stepped by faith. It wasn't until *after* they stepped into faith that God revealed His work, and they found success.

Don't hide from doubt or cower in fear. Walk with God as you explore the answers for our doubts, and discover how great of a truth you have been given.

Don't lose faith because you doubt what will happen when you step in faith. You don't have to be doubtless in order to be strong in the faith. Doubt is the flesh calling for control, but faith is stepping out of the flesh and into the life of the Spirit.

God is greater than fear and doubt. You overcome these by faith – trusting in God and walking where He leads. That is when the Spirit steps in and suppresses the power of the flesh, which also crushes doubt.

Discussion Questions

Is fear a sin? Why or why not?

Is doubt a sin? Why or why not?

Read Matthew 26:39-44.

Did Jesus have fear or doubt?

What happened when Jesus surrendered to the Father's will?

Should the church criticize people who express doubt?

Does denying doubt increase faith?

Read Nehemiah 2:2-4

Did Nehemiah have fear?

Did his fear turn him from God's call?

Read Judges 7:9-10.

Was Gideon afraid?

Why was God able to use both Gideon and Nehemiah in spite of their fears and doubts?

Will God put you into an impossible circumstance to test you?

What is the purpose of testing us with fear and doubt?

Why did the first generation that came out of Egyptian slavery fail to receive the Promise Land?

Read Hebrews 5:3.

Was the promise already theirs?

If the work was already finished, why didn't they receive the promise?

Why did God test them?

Read Judges 6:11-12.

Why did God call Gideon a mighty man of valor even though he was hiding from his enemies?

What About Sin?

It is almost inevitable that when the gospel of grace is taught the way the Bible truly presents it, people raise objections because of a fear that it will be taken as a license to sin. I have been in church my entire life, and I have never seen sin depart from the congregation because the church turned to the old law as their method for dealing with sin. Sin abounds just as much in legalistic churches as it does in grace believing churches. I would even argue that sin abounds more in legalism, but it's masked behind religious pride. Scripture even backs this argument.

The Bible says that when the law entered, sin abounded more.¹²³ In legalism, people are forced to hide their sins or leave the church, but the sin hasn't been resolved. If anything, spiritual pride, which is also a sin, is more rampant. If you look at the ministry of Jesus, He was very hard on the religious elite, and very compassionate on the sinner. There is a reason for this. Spiritual pride always produces self-blindness to personal sin.

Even though the entire Jewish culture was built around the Old Testament law, not one person was able to keep it.¹²⁴ Since it was impossible to keep the law, the religious establishment customized the law into something they could keep. Then they condemned those who didn't keep their revised version of the law.

Jesus called the religious elite, adulterous, blind, children of the devil, broods of vipers, and many other identifiers that shocked the religious community. Many times Jesus pointed to the Ten Commandments and said, "You think you are keeping these, but I say to you..." then Jesus would point to the sinful thoughts and secret sins that put the religious people of His day onto the same level as the sinners they were criticizing. Jesus always brought the focus back to the law – not the customized law that religion builds in its place.

Legalism has to have a dumbed down law, for human effort can never rise up to a divine standard. We cannot stomach failure, so mankind always alters the rules. But Jesus stepped into the fantasy world of religion and dismantled it. While the religious leaders were trying to reword things into something they could keep, Jesus took them straight to the power of the law, which even condemned their best works.

Let's take a moment to pull back to a wider view of the action of Jesus' ministry to see the bigger picture. There were two main

¹²³ Romans 5:20

¹²⁴ Acts 15:10

groups – those who focused on the law, and those who trusted in Christ to rescue them from sin.

Those who focused on the law and religious rules found themselves opposing the work of Christ. Those who focused on their relationship with Jesus were transformed.

Faith in the transforming power of Christ as the work of grace without human effort may indeed be criticized by religion today, but it's no different than it was in Jesus' day. "Why does your Master eat with sinners?" the Pharisees demanded of Jesus' followers. "Why does He befriend drunkards, prostitutes, and those mired in sin?"

In Jesus day, the law never transformed sinners into saints. The weight of the law condemns all, but human nature customizes the law into something religious people can keep, and then it is used to separate the rule keeper from those they deem as sinners. That's why people still teach that we are required to fulfill the law and force ourselves to love God with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength. Yet if you ask that teacher of the law if they have succeeded, they will say, "No. But I try my best. God only expects our best."

False.

The law never accepts our best effort. It is an 'all or nothing' system. Just as it was with the Pharisees, when today's religion realizes the impossibility of the law, it is customized into something they can keep. Nowhere does the Law say, "God only wants your best effort." According to scripture, if we keep the whole law, but only offend in one area, we are guilty of all the law.¹²⁵ So why would we want to return to a system of condemnation? Even the most elite religious person will offend the law and be condemned by the very thing they have dedicated their lives to keeping.

But God made a better way. Let's look at the other group – the sinners. Jesus was condemned for dining with sinners. To dine with someone in the Jewish culture of that era was an act of acceptance and welcoming them into a relationship with you. That is why the account of Jesus and Zacchaeus was so shocking to the people. Zacchaeus was an ostracized sinner who sought out Jesus. He was a tax collector, and because that profession allowed for legalized thievery, and collectors were also traitors that were now siding with the oppressive Roman government, tax collectors were considered the worst of all sinners.

When Zacchaeus was pushed away by people in the crowd, he found a tree that overshadowed the road where Jesus was heading and climbed it. Jesus looked up, and saw the town scoundrel. In

¹²⁵ James 2:10

front of the crowd, Jesus said, “Zacchaeus, I am coming to your house to dine today.”

No respectable Jew would dare enter the house of such a sinner. This is especially true of a great teacher of the people, such as Jesus. Yet Jesus broke the social norms and welcomed another sinner.

Zacchaeus is a great example of the law versus grace. The story of Zacchaeus butts up against the story of a lawyer. In the Bible, a lawyer was someone who studies the Old Testament Law, and was an expert in interpreting it for the people. In Luke 17, a wealthy lawyer tried to justify himself to Jesus and even claimed to keep the commandment to love God with all his heart, mind, soul and strength. He also claimed to love his neighbor as himself.

Jesus skipped the hard part – loving God with 100% of his being, and challenged his ability to keep the command to love his neighbor as himself. The lawyer said, “I have kept these since my youth.”

And this is the deception of religion. He kept the version of the law the religious leaders fashioned for themselves. I’m sure he kept it better than most. He had money and probably gave more to the poor than his peers, studied the scriptures more than his peers, and other personal efforts. But the law demands one-hundred percent perfection. Otherwise you have fallen short and are under its condemnation.

Jesus said that if he wanted to keep this law perfectly, he would have to sell all that he has and give to the poor. After all, how can he be rich, and claim he loves his poor neighbor as himself? The truth is, none of us can keep this. We will love OUR children first, OUR spouse first, OUR needs first, and then we will be willing to help with whatever we have left. But that is not what the law demands. I cannot have more than my neighbor, and claim to love my neighbor as myself.

When Jesus challenged the man by saying he would have to sell all, the rich man walked away sorrowfully. The truth of the law had just destroyed his personal righteousness.

Yet one chapter later, we see how grace was able to do what the law could not do. Zacchaeus was the opposite of the lawyer. He broke the law to become rich. He used his position as a tax collector to rob his own countrymen. Tax collectors were lovers of money, for they had the power to raise the cost of taxes to pad their own pockets. They had to collect a certain amount, and anything they could get above that amount would go into their own pockets. They were legalized thieves, and the people hated them. They were viewed as the worst of sinners.

Jesus never asked Zacchaeus to do anything. Jesus accepted Zacchaeus, invited him into fellowship, and that relationship

transformed Zacchaeus' heart. Without any command, Zacchaeus said, "Lord, I am giving half of my goods to feed the poor, and if I have taken anything, I will restore it fourfold."¹²⁶

This encounter started by people complaining, "Why is Jesus going to have dinner with this sinner?" but ended with that sinner being transformed into a godly man.

Jesus demonstrated His love to prostitutes, drunkards, thieves, and the outcasts of society. These people were transformed into disciples and examples of godliness.

And that is what the modern church still doesn't understand. Jesus never demanded a change from the people He encountered. He was the change maker. It is IMPOSSIBLE to have fellowship with Christ and remain in sin. Our focus is never to be on the sin. Our focus is on drawing near to Christ, and His Spirit within us makes the change. Then we, who were sinners, are changed into the godliness that is unattainable to those who are focused on the law, rules, and religious practices.

Will there be people who choose to pursue sin even though they have been rescued by grace? Of course there will be. But that is not our concern. We can't abandon the gospel of grace because someone might sin. It all boils down to what someone wants. If someone wants to invest their lives into this world, that is an option God will not deny them. But if someone sees the value of fellowship with the Lord, that will transform every part of their life. Each weakness will be transformed by God's strength. It may be fast, or a slow growth, but there is no way to pursue our relationship with Christ and pursue sin.

The church does not believe in the power of God's transforming love, so they try to replace grace with rules. Rules cannot change the heart. Look at **John 14:23-24**

²³ Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him.

²⁴ "He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine but the Father's who sent Me.

It's interesting how that if someone looks at this through the lens of the law, they think that keeping commandments will make God love them, or will make them start loving God.

The opposite is true. It is those who learn to abide in Christ's love (fellowship) who begin to see the transforming power of God. As we grow in love, we become more like Him, and then we learn

¹²⁶ Luke 19:8

to walk where He is walking. The evidence that we are walking in love is that we start keeping His commandments. It's not the other way around. Our obedience is the evidence that we have a closeness to Christ.

This is reiterated in Romans 2:14. This passage tells us that the Gentiles (non-Jews) were raised without the law, yet because of their relationship with Christ, their nature began to change, and then by nature they were doing the things that were in the law. And this was without even knowing the law.

The truth is that you cannot transform yourself. You can't use rules or laws to make yourself acceptable to God. In fact, if you are trying to please God through the law, you are rejecting Christ, and trying to elevate yourself to His level. Scripture teaches that God has seated us with Christ because of our faith in Him and what He has done for us. He exalts us when we humble ourselves by faith. He humbles those who try to exalt themselves.

Sin is not what we should be concerned with. The greater sin is to push Christ aside, and try to keep the law ourselves. Our focus is on fellowship through faith in Him.

The way of truth will always be spoken against. It was condemned during the time of the apostles, and it will be today. People are still being taught that it's dangerous to believe completely on God's gospel of grace, because sin must be fought by human effort.

In Romans 5, the Apostle Paul taught how that even if sin abounds, grace *much more* abounds. Some teachers condemn what they call 'hyper-grace' because they fear it will become a license to sin. However, the Christian life can only operate as God has designed it – even if it doesn't make sense to human reasoning.

Even so, I believe that when this teaching is fully explored, it is clear that the way of grace is the only way to truly overcome sin.

The concept of 'hyper-grace' comes from **Romans 5:20-21**

²⁰ Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound.

But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more,

²¹ so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The New Testament was originally written in Greek. The phrase 'abounded much more', is translated from the Greek word, *hyperperisseuo*. This is where we get our English word, hyperactive. It means to exceedingly abound to the point of completely overwhelming the subject of what is being discussed. In this case, the topic is sin abounding. However, the word used for abounding when discussing sin is, *pleonazo*, which is where the word *plenty* or *plenteous* originates. In essence, what is being

taught is that where sin is plenteous, grace comes in with so much energy and force, that sin is completely driven out by the power of God's grace.

Even in the Old Testament, we are told that Jesus will make an end of sin. Look at **Daniel 9:24**

Seventy weeks are determined for your people and for your holy city, To finish the transgression, To make an end of sins, To make reconciliation for iniquity, To bring in everlasting righteousness, To seal up vision and prophecy, And to anoint the Most Holy.

This was a prophecy that in seventy weeks of years (490 years) after the order to rebuild the temple was given, Jesus will present Himself as Messiah (or the Savior). This was fulfilled in Matthew 21:9 when Jesus came into Jerusalem and presented Himself as Christ.

The above passage in Daniel makes it clear that Jesus' purpose was to finish the transgression. He did this by nailing sin to the cross. He then brought an end of sin, and reconciled us from our iniquities. He gave us His righteousness, which is everlasting. Sin came to an end, but His righteousness will never end. And according to scripture, this righteousness was given to us.¹²⁷ It's the gift of God, not something produced by human effort.

Scripture teaches that sin is no longer a concern, and is no longer our focus. Grace is. The old law system focused on sin, but that has been replaced by the flood of the New Covenant of Grace. That is now our focus.

If this is true, and it is, people naturally raise an objection because that could be taken as a license to sin. After all, if my sin makes grace abound, then I can sin freely with no concern for personal holiness or the consequences of sin, right?

This concern is not new, for the Bible addresses this concern in the next chapter (Romans 6). The Apostle Paul dealt with these same objections, which is why the next chapter begins with, "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?"

The Bible answers this question. Of course not! How can we be raised into new life in Christ, and then go back to live in the same system of death grace has overwhelmed and freed us from?

To help clarify what the Bible teaches about the topic of sin and the Christian, let's take a deeper dive into this subject. We have already looked at how the law was removed, and that we were not only set free from the law, but also from the sin which was empowered by the law. Many think that focusing on the law is how

¹²⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:21

sin is held back, but the Bible teaches that the strength of sin is the law.¹²⁸ The Bible also teaches something interesting in **Romans 4:15b**:

Where there is no law *there is* no transgression.

Add to this these two passages:

Romans 8:2

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death.

Galatians 5:18

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

If there is no law to condemn those who are in Christ, and God will no longer judge us by the law, why wouldn't a Christian live in sin? What prevents sin from reigning in our lives? This was partially answered in Romans 5 above. Grace reigns through the righteousness given to us in the new life we have in Christ. Where our old spirit was naturally comfortable in sin, our new spirit gives us a new nature that is comfortable in righteousness.

A Christian will never be at peace in sin. While our body is still corrupted and craves sin, the inner man, who is you, craves the things of God. As you learn to listen to the inner drawing of God, you start finding rest and joy in godly things. I have never met a Christian that lived in sin and had peace. I have never met a Christian that lived for the flesh and was happy. Why is that so? Because our spirit finds rest in the godly things that align with who we are. It can never find comfort in sin again.

That doesn't mean you won't sin. Nor does it mean that you should live in fear of sin. The truth is that you are called to take your focus off sin, and look to where you are going. As your spiritual life matures, your mind will mature into godliness without you having to make yourself do what you don't want to do. The Bible says that when we delight ourselves in the Lord, He gives us the desires of our heart.¹²⁹ As you discover the depth of your relationship with God, your desires will grow into the things that God has designed for you. Then you will learn to walk by faith, and receive the abundant life God has promised. This is where you find true satisfaction, and the Bible says that when God pours into us, there is no sorrow that comes with it.¹³⁰ The same cannot be said for sin.

¹²⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:56

¹²⁹ Psalm 37:4

¹³⁰ Proverbs 10:22

We cannot expect a new Christian to live a perfectly godly life. Until there is maturity, sin will always look promising. It's called temptation because it is alluring – but only if someone hasn't grown to the level where they can see beyond the temptation. An illustration I like to use is this. When an adult walks through a nursery, are they tempted to hide a toy in their pocket and sneak away with it? A three-year-old does, so why doesn't an adult? It's because an adult has matured out of that mindset. It's no longer tempting because our values have changed.

At its core, the problem isn't a sin problem, but a maturity problem. God has taken care of the sin, and has provided the path to spiritual growth so that we gain a healthy spiritual life that overcomes the weakness of the flesh.

A new Christian, or someone who has not yet started maturing, finds sin to be more tempting than someone who has grown in their faith. The immature believer is still drawing from their old life. Even though sin never delivers the promised result, that person is still lured by the empty promises of sin. They have not yet learned what it means to walk by the joy set before them.

The Bible says that Jesus endured the very cross He despised because of the joy set before Him.¹³¹ He saw the benefits beyond the earthly demands He was facing. We are told to adopt this same mindset. This principle is true when we are going through difficult times and hardships, but it equally applies to temptations and the cares of this life. If we are looking at the immediate circumstances set before us, we will act according to our immediate gratification, or the immediate relief from the difficulty. But when we are looking at the joy set before us, we will begin acting from a healthier mindset. Our spiritual lives are based on God's plan, and the eternal perspective. Temptation only focuses on a moment of hope based on a temporary world. This is why the Bible teaches us to grow in the knowledge of Christ, and the exceeding promises that are revealed through Him.¹³²

The promise of abundant life, God's purpose designed for you, and the eternal vision we have been given is what helps grow us into a mature way of thinking. As we grow in our understanding and can see beyond the moment, we will find joy even in the harshest circumstances, and will make decisions based on a long-term perspective. We will approach our lives as spiritual adults instead of short-sighted children.

¹³¹ Hebrews 12:2

¹³² 2 Peter 1:3-8,

We are constantly investing our lives in either the positive or the negative. An immature person does not consider the future, but the mature does. Consider **Galatians 6:7-8**

⁷ Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.

⁸ For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.

The word *mocked* means to turn your nose up at something. Any parent of teens has experienced this. When I tell my kids to work first and play later, because if they play first, they won't have time to complete school work, they sometimes roll their eyes at the advice. Their desire to have fun is drawing their focus, and they always believe they will get their responsibilities caught up later. But it almost always backfires. Then they get a lower grade and reap what they have invested their time into. Then they have to work twice as hard to get caught up, and have to deal with the consequences of disregarding the standards we have set for their good.

In the same way, God has called us to live according to a spiritual life, and warned of the consequences of living for the flesh. When we look at temptation and turn our nose at God's instructions, God does not come down on us with wrath. He allows our lives to reap the consequences of what we have invested in. You are always sowing and reaping.

This is why sin matters. Yes, we have escaped sin and are no longer under the law of sin and death, yet we can still turn back to that old life and invest in those things. We can sow the seeds of our lives into a system that only reaps the things we have died to, or we can sow into the things that bring life and count for eternity. This is why developing a healthy mindset is so important. As we mature, our perspective changes from valuing the things that are bound to sin and death, to valuing the things that have life.

We have all seen bad decision-makers. When someone is determined to make bad decisions, we can warn them all we want, but they are so focused on the false promise of gratification that they ignore every red flag and warning sign. Whether it is someone pursuing a bad relationship, or a money maker using dangerous investments, life is filled with examples of people who can't be persuaded not to make a bad decision. The truth is that what we invest our lives into is exactly what we can expect to spring up in our lives down the road.

Having said that, let me clarify something. Not everything bad that happens is the consequences of bad decisions. Life does throw curve balls. Sometimes tragedy hits. But the Christian who has

invested themselves into building a solid foundation in Christ can withstand the unexpected hardships that will come. Seasons of hardships are also times of sowing and reaping. A wise Christian will respond to tragedy or difficulties by investing in faith. They begin learning how to trust God as they struggle, knowing that they will later reap the promises of God. That is the person that emerges from tragedy with a powerful faith and testimony. The one who invests in complaining, bitterness, and blaming God will drag through the problem weakened and disgruntled with God.

There are hardships, and there are consequences. When we look at the fruit of our lives, we will see the difference. Though a Christian can live for sin, they will lack peace, and they are sowing things in their lives that cannot produce the abundant life. Look at **1 Corinthians 10:23**

All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful;
all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify.

A Christian has been set free from the law and they are now free to invest in what they choose. Even though you may no longer be under the condemnation of the law, not all options lead to good. The word 'helpful' in the above passage can also be translated as 'profitable'. You are free to sow into whatever you choose, but not everything is profitable. Somethings produce the fruit of dead works. There are consequences instead of profit.

The Bible is filled with promises. These are given so that you can fully understand that God is for you. He has a plan that will abundantly satisfy your life now, and carry into eternity. When you listen to the Lord, you discover the blessed life. We even have the promise that we will be satisfied during the times of famine. Look at **Psalms 37:18-19**

¹⁸ The LORD knows the days of the upright, And their inheritance shall be forever.

¹⁹ They shall not be ashamed in the evil time, And in the days of famine they shall be satisfied.

God knows every day you will live through, and He has planned to bless you now, and forever. Even when evil arises, hardships come, and life seems like a trial, you have the promise that you will be satisfied. I love the way this is reiterated in **Jeremiah 17:8**

For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters, which spreads out its roots by the river, And will not fear when heat comes; But its leaf will be green, And will not be anxious in the year of drought, Nor will cease from yielding fruit.

Even in the hardest seasons of life, you have the promise that you will be satisfied and will flourish. When someone would normally wither away, those who walk in His ways will remain fruitful and satisfied, because they have sown into the life of faith.

The message of sin according to the New Testament gospel of grace is that you are free. You are free from the bondage of sin that once held you. You are free to stop worrying about sin. You no longer have to worry about fighting against sin in your life. Because sin has lost its power, you are free to live without the fear of sin and judgment. You can now focus on learning how to walk by faith, and forget whether or not you have offended God. No longer do you have to live defensively, but you can now pursue life knowing that God has taken care of sin.

Now you are free to invest your life any way you desire. However, we must grow into maturity so we can see beyond the moment, and to what we will one day reap. You can indeed sow according to the desires of your flesh, but know that the fruit of sin is what will emerge down the road. Or you can sow into your spiritual life, knowing that the blessed life is what will emerge. Even when life throws hardships your way, you will still prosper, flourish, and be satisfied. And on the other side of the valley of hardship will be the harvest of God's abundant life for you.

Discussion Questions

Read 1 Corinthians 8:1

Why does the Bible warn us that knowledge puffs us up with pride?

Read Romans 5:20 and Romans 8:3.

What caused sin to abound more?

Why is the law powerless to defeat sin?

Read Matthew 22:34-40 and 1 John 4:9-11

Why does the passage in Matthew focus on our love, but 1 John says it's not about our love?

Why did the keeper of the law in Luke 17 walk away from salvation sorrowfully, but in Luke 18, Zacchaeus the thief found salvation?

Read Romans 5:5 and John 14:23-24.

Does obeying make us love God, or does love draw us into obedience?

Why doesn't the law produce a changed life?

Why does God's love transform a person?

What happens when someone is taught that God is angry and demanding?

Read Romans 2:14.

How did the non-Jew keep the law, when they didn't even know the law?

Review Romans 5:20-21.

How is sin destroyed in our lives?

Review Romans 8:2 and Galatians 5:18.

What role does the law have to those who are now in the Spirit by faith in Christ?

Review Galatians 6:7-8.

What does the mature Christian focus on as the investment of their lives? How about the immature Christian?

Which matures believers more, confining them with rules? or teaching them to grow in Christ?

How does 1 Corinthians 10:23 apply to living in sin or living for righteousness?

Maturing in Christ

When the Corinthian church was struggling, the Apostle Paul stated, “I fear that your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.”¹³³ Religion tends to make the Christian life complicated, but the Bible gives us the simplest picture of faith. There are three main things to keep in focus as we learn to walk by faith. Look at **1 Corinthians 13:13**

And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

When everything is reduced to its simplest form, it is either faith, hope, or love. Faith in what God has done or promised. Hope in what God is doing or leading us into. And love is the foundation everything is built on. Never lose sight of love. How we relate to God begins with this foundational truth, “We have known and believed in the love God has for us.”¹³⁴ The foundation of how we relate to each other is found in Jesus’ instruction when He said, “By this shall all men know (including the world) that you are my disciples, by your love for one another.”¹³⁵

The reason the Christian reveals love is because we are founded upon His love. A Christian that doesn’t believe, or isn’t founded upon God’s love will struggle to love. I’ve witnessed many people say and do awful things to others while claiming to be serving God. Yet if you cannot see God’s love and compassion in an act, it is not of God. Period.

The Bible says that anyone who says, “I love God,” but shows hatred to others, is a liar. They may be in self-deception, or following bad teachings, but it is still a lie. Holding up a sign that says, “Got hates... [name the group]” is following a lie and not the gospel.

The same is true for your personal journey of faith. If anything in your life does not affirm God’s love for you (and others), give you hope, and point you to faith, it is a deception, distraction, and a lie.

Let me pause for a moment to make sure we have an accurate definition of hope. In the English vernacular, when we are asked if we are going to get something, we say, “I hope so.” “I hope I get that promotion.” “I hope my team wins.” This is not how the Bible defines hope. Hope is the confident expectation of good. When the Bible says that hope is set before us, it is referring to a certain

¹³³ 2 Corinthians 11:3

¹³⁴ 1 John 4:16

¹³⁵ John 13:35

expectation of good that causes us to persevere. When you know something good is a guarantee, you will gladly endure the challenges it takes to get there. Hope in the Bible is based on certainty, not a fanciful wish.

Always keep these three things as a litmus test for teaching. Everything must affirm and encourage faith, hope, and love. Having said this, let's examine one of the best passages to follow toward spiritual maturity. As you read through this, keep in mind that everything is a gift from God that leads you deeper into faith, hope, and love. It is not a 'what you must do' list, but a 'what God has done and what is given to you' list.

Let's read through this passage in its entirety, and then dig in a little deeper. Look at **2 Peter 1:3-11**

³ as His divine power has given to us all things that *pertain* to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue,

⁴ by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption *that is* in the world through lust.

⁵ But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge,

⁶ to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness,

⁷ to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love.

⁸ For if these things are yours and abound, *you* will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁹ For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins.

¹⁰ Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble;

¹¹ for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Everything in this passage is based on God's promise to you. Verse 4 establishes this by saying, "By which have been given to you exceedingly precious promises that through these you may be partakers of God's divine nature."

In other words, these are not a list of things you must do in order to be right with God. This is a list of expectations you are to have, knowing these are yours in Christ, and you are to discover how to receive these from God into your daily walk. Remember,

faith, hope, and love. The hope here is the confident expectation of these promises. Faith is trusting in these to receive them, knowing that these are gifts of God's love for you. We hope in the certainty of these promises, and their effects on our lives. These are guarantees, and in order to thrive in this abundant life of Christianity, we must see these promises and receive them.

This is why the Bible says that faith comes by hearing the word of God. Without the revelation of this through the word, how can you have faith to receive? How can you receive what you have never heard of? Or worse, how can you receive these promises if someone is teaching you that these are things you must do, instead of things God has provided?

Once you are born in the Spirit, you are a child of God by right.¹³⁶ As part of your birthright, you have free access to the throne of grace,¹³⁷ and free access to be a partaker of God's divine nature. These are by promise – not merit. These are freely given, not earned. They are by promise, which cannot be withdrawn.

Contrary to what is often taught, you don't become right with God so you can approach Him. You approach Him by faith, and He freely gives you all these things of promise so your life can be transformed. You can't get right with God. You can only partake of the life of the Spirit, which then flows from your spirit to your outward life. It cannot, and will never, work the other way around. You can never become spiritually mature by your outward behavior. You must grow from the inner man (your spirit) and this will flow out to your outward behavior.

You don't stop sinning. You start walking by faith, and sin will be repelled away.

Verse 4 also says that through these promises you become partakers of God's nature. As you receive these things, you grow in your understanding, and this draws you deeper into the life of the Spirit where you are always a partaker through Christ.

Also notice, you have (past tense) escaped the corruption of the world. This is a completed work of Christ. You escaped through Him. It doesn't mean your flesh no longer craves sin, but you have escaped its power and the corruption of the world. By faith, you must believe this declaration of God so you will not fear approaching Him.

For this reason – that you have escaped the world and are given the right to approach God – you are called to give all diligence to begin receiving and adding these to your life. Diligence means to strive after something or make haste to obtain. If you know you

¹³⁶ John 1:12

¹³⁷ Hebrews 4:16

have a great treasure, and you are in poverty, you will make haste to get to it so you can begin living by a new and better standard.

Once you believe these are yours, and you get a glimpse of the vision of the abundant life, you will be drawn to receive. This is also why it is important not to teach the doctrine of condemnation to the believer. If you believe you have no right or worthiness to ask or receive, you will be stuck in the cycle of confession, falling, repenting, and confession.

This is why the Bible tells the Hebrew church that it is time to stop laying again the foundation of repentance and go on toward perfection.¹³⁸ And what we are discussing in 2 Peter is the path toward perfection.

The way of growth begins with faith. We are not told to add faith, but to add to what is already established, which is our faith. We add virtue, or moral excellence. God is pure, and we are receiving His purity, which produces His moral excellence in us.

There was a woman in our church many years ago, who came out of a very immoral lifestyle. When she became a Christian, she came before the church to profess her faith. She was dressed like a seductress. That was all she knew. Yet over time, her clothes became less revealing, and in a short while, you would never know what type of a woman she had been. What seemed natural and normal changed as she began to see herself in Christ. Then her outer life began to match what she was seeing in her inner spiritual life of faith.

This passage is not teaching you to become morally excellent in order for God to accept you. What it is teaching is that if you begin to partake of God's purity, your moral life will begin to change into His image. Yet if you try to become morally pure before you come to God, you will never rise high enough to consider yourself as worthy.

As we continue to explore the Christian life, you have the promise of knowledge. The Bible tells us that we will cease from proclaiming human-based wisdom and start proclaiming that which the Spirit teaches.¹³⁹ This is based on the promise that the Spirit searches the deep things of God and reveals them to us.¹⁴⁰ We have the promise that we can receive the Spirit of wisdom, revelation, and knowledge of Christ.¹⁴¹ This is a crucial part of our spiritual maturity, for the Bible says that we are renewed inwardly through knowledge according to the image of Christ.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Hebrews 6:1

¹³⁹ 1 Corinthians 2:13

¹⁴⁰ 1 Corinthians 2:10

¹⁴¹ Ephesians 1:17

¹⁴² Colossians 3:10

Knowledge is referring to the depths of God and the understanding of Christ. As you learn of Christ, you are also learning about the life you have been given. You are discovering what He has done, and how this is imparted to your own spiritual walk. Without knowledge of the word, you won't have the knowledge of Christ, and your spiritual growth will be stunted.

As your knowledge grows, this opens the door to receive the fruit of the Spirit, and this causes the next promise to emerge – self-control. You master the desires of the flesh, not by human will or will power, but by learning how to walk in the Spirit. Then the flesh loses control because we are being led by the Spirit. The Spirit produces self-control by revealing better promises. As we learn to walk according to our new nature, the desires of the new nature emerge and the distaste for the flesh naturally gives us self-control.

Will power is based on the human will, which is rooted in the flesh. Using human will power is actually relinquishing control to the flesh in the hope that we can use the flesh to stop us from acting out in the flesh. You can't empower the flesh in hopes that it will control itself.

When you are walking according to faith, and then temptation comes calling, you have to turn from faith and give control over to the flesh in order to fulfill lusts. This means that you are already in self-control, and you have to give it up in order to willingly give into sin. Self-control is already present when you are walking by faith, so it is not dependent on will power and human effort.

You have the promise, "Walk in the Spirit and you will not fulfill the lust of the flesh."¹⁴³ That promise has not been given to a rules-based religious method. It is a normal part of the Christian walk of faith.

After this, you are given the power of God to maintain that walk with the promise of perseverance. Perseverance means to have consistency, endurance, or to be someone who is not swayed from their purpose.

The next thing we receive is godliness. Godliness needs little explanation. We show reverence to the way of truth as our lives conform to the image of Christ.

We then receive brotherly kindness, which comes from the Greek word, 'philia'. Philia love is a friendship type of love. It is how we build relationships and perform kind acts to each other. This is a different type of love than the last promise in this particular list, agape love.

The word 'love' in verse 7 is from the Greek word 'agape'. This only refers to God's love. It is unconditional, selfless, sacrificing,

¹⁴³ Galatians 5:16

outward focused love. Agape love seeks the good of another person regardless of whether it is acknowledged or reciprocated. In fact, it is often unacknowledged because it does not seek self-glory or kudos. Agape loves because that is the nature of agape. God loves because He is love. He causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust. Good is sent out, even if it is not reciprocated. The Bible says that Jesus is the Savior of all men, and He died to take away the sins of the whole world. So even to the person who rejects that love, it does not change love.

As you study this passage, keep in mind that we are not being taught that we can't grow in self-control until virtue is mastered. The truth is that we never stop growing in any of these promises. You will see love emerging long before spiritual maturity is far along. What this passage is teaching is that each of these attributes we receive from God's nature flow into the next thing. Virtue will naturally reveal things in knowledge, which will affect our self-control. Self-control promotes perseverance, and the consistent life will grow in godliness. All these things are things to explore in Christ – and they are already yours. Your only role is to seek God as you receive these by faith.

As you grow in spiritual maturity, you receive an important guarantee. You cannot be unfruitful. You will never look at your life and feel dry or barren. You will grow in knowledge of Christ, and you will have an abundantly fruitful life. This includes the fruit of the Spirit, fruitful personal ministry and calling, and a fulfilled life.

Notice what happens when people neglect their spiritual health as explained in verse 9. He who lacks these things will be short sighted and will even forget that he has been cleansed from his old sins.

What is more short-sighted than self-focusing. If you stop looking at Christ, you will start looking at yourself and others. You will forget that you have been cleansed, and self-condemnation will arise. You will see your failures, your sins, and your weaknesses. A condemned heart becomes a condemning spirit. Because sin is now the focus, it will be tempting to see faults in others, compare ourselves to others, and even to point out failures of other people in order to make ourselves feel better. A condemned heart is not finding hope in Christ, so it tries to find hope by looking for someone who is worse off than ourselves so we don't feel as condemned as the other person.

When you are focused on yourself, it reveals that you are short-sighted. When you seek flaws in others, it reveals that you are blind to the heart of the gospel. You are not looking at the hope set before you and the exceedingly precious promises. The opposite is true for those growing in faith.

If you do these things you will NEVER stumble. What is the ‘do’ in this passage? It is to place our trust in God’s divine power to fulfill these promises. The ‘do’ is to believe and receive. The ‘do’ is to be diligent (or to make haste) to receive His strength for your weaknesses. When you are inadequate, you begin looking at His supply. What you lack, God supplies.

Before we end this chapter, I want to address one phrase that is often misunderstood in verse 10, “Be even more diligent to make your call and election sure.”

In the past, I struggled with this because I was taught that you were called by God, but if you didn’t do things right, you would lose that calling. You had to do these things in order to be elected for salvation. This is not what this passage is talking about.

We have already addressed the ‘doing’. Now let’s address the call and election becoming sure.

According to the Bible, God’s call goes to the ends of the earth, and Jesus died for the whole world. According to the Bible, we receive the call to new life by faith. Once we receive eternal life, there is no ending of it, for the Bible says that the gift and calling of God is irrevocable. He will never take back the gift of salvation and new life.

However, we can live as though this life is what matters and never experience the abundant life given to us in Christ. We just read that anyone who neglects these things is short-sighted and even blind. Many Christians are blinded to what they have because they can only look at themselves, or the world through the eyes of the flesh.

Yet the person who receives these things has the promise that their call and election is sure. ‘Sure’ is the key word for understanding this passage. The original Greek word translated into ‘sure’ means: stability, firmness, surety.¹⁴⁴

To put it in English terminology, when you are living in these promises, your call of God will keep you stable and assured. Just look at Christians who do not apply themselves to discovering God. They are unstable in their faith. They doubt, fear God’s anger, question their salvation. They have no assurance or stability of faith. They are spiritual creations trying to find a foundation on the shifting sands of this life.

But the person who lives in faith and is a receiver and partaker of God’s divine nature will become stable in their faith, certain of God’s promises, and trust in their calling. Doubt dies because faith is a firm foundation. That is why the Bible can say, “They will never stumble.”

¹⁴⁴ Bebaios: stable, stability, fastened, trustworthy, firm, firmness

Not only will they never stumble, but God abundantly supplies everything that is already theirs in the Kingdom of God. Everything has already been supplied, but not everything is discovered. To some, very little is discovered, for the abundant life can only be lived by faith, and the supply of God can only be received by faith.

He who lacks these things becomes self-focused, sin-focused, and is blind to God's abundance. But those who diligently apply the promise of faith will receive in abundance.

This is the person that will grow into maturity. Let's conclude with **Hebrews 11:6**

But without faith *it is impossible to please Him*, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and *that* He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

Notice that God didn't promise to reward the hardest worker, or the one who knows the law the best. He promises to reward you, who diligently seek Him, believing in His promise to reward. It is the same promise as found in 2 Peter. God doesn't want you to do for Him. He wants you to know Him and discover what He has done for you. Then works become His work *in* you instead of your work *for* Him.

Discussion Questions

Review 1 Corinthians 13:13 and 1 John 4:16.

How does the foundation of love establish our Christian walk?

Define each of these: faith, hope, love.

What happens when the foundation of love is absent, but the truth is being proclaimed? Is that of God?

Read 1 John 4:20 and Matthew 5:44-45.

If we label someone as an enemy of God, are we still required to love them?

Read 2 Peter 1:3-11.

How does verse 3 and 4 help us to understand this list of promises?

Is this a list of commandments to do, or promises to receive?

In verse 9, we are told that the person who lacks these things becomes short-sighted. Why does neglecting our promise of receiving from God cause us to focus on ourselves and the failure of others?

Is there anything in the Christian walk that God has not already supplied?

If we struggle in any area of life, how do we overcome what we are lacking?

Look at verse 8. Does God guarantee a fruitful life?

Look at the end of verse 10. Does God promise that we will never stumble?

If we don't see these promises fulfilled, how do we obtain them?

What does it mean to make your call and election sure?

Why is it hard to live in these promises?

Shadow Boxing

The way of grace is difficult to accept for the religious mind because it goes against human reasoning. The Bible states that our thoughts and ways are not God's thoughts and ways.¹⁴⁵ If we approach the life of faith from human reasoning and logic, it will seem absurd. This is one of the main reasons grace falls under so much criticism. When we approach the gospel from the perspective of human reasoning, it doesn't make sense. This is why the Bible says the human mind cannot discern the ways of the Spirit, for they can only be discerned through the Spirit's revelation.¹⁴⁶

The human mind says, "How can we overcome sin unless we do something?" Yet God states that He will cause us to walk in His ways through the power of the Spirit within us.

Human reasoning says, "If you tell people that all sin has been removed, and we no longer need to focus on sin, then people will sin freely." Yet the Bible teaches that our new nature desires righteousness more than our old nature desired sin. If our minds are in the Spirit, sin is no longer a concern. The primary thing we need to focus on is resting in grace so our spiritual life can grow and begin producing the fruit of the Spirit.

In Christ, sin has no power, yet we are teaching people to fight against the shadow of what has already passed away.

As is often the case, the common way of thinking is the opposite of God's way. This should not be surprising since the natural mind cannot comprehend the things of God because they are only understood in the Spirit.

What makes sense to human reasoning is not the way God has designed the Christian walk. Consider this passage in **1 Corinthians 2:14-16**

¹⁴ But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned.

¹⁵ But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is *rightly* judged by no one.

¹⁶ For "who has known the mind of the LORD that he may instruct Him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

This is why people can't let go of the law, rules, and regulations. To the human mind, this is foolishness. How can we expect someone to live in righteousness if we take away the rules

¹⁴⁵ Isaiah 55:8-9

¹⁴⁶ 1 Corinthians 2:14

that people use in an attempt to fight against sin? Won't that make people sin more?

People can't stop sinning with the rules in place, even though it never satisfies. However, the person that begins to experience their life in the Spirit begins desiring the things of the Spirit, which repels from the sins of the flesh. So no, taking away rules does not make people desire sin. In fact, it is just the opposite. Focusing on rules empowers the flesh, which creates the desire for sin.¹⁴⁷

Examples of this are all around us. Put a sign under a button that says, "Do not push," and see what happens. Tell a child not to look in a closet and see how long before curiosity gets the best of him. He may have never even thought about the closet until you make a rule forbidding it.

The ways of God contradict human reasoning. The Bible says that those who are in the Spirit (born into Christ) are no longer under the law.¹⁴⁸ And where there is no law, sin is not imputed.¹⁴⁹ The natural mind can't comprehend this, for this is foolishness to our human way of thinking. This is why legalistic (rule-based thinking) gets upset when grace is taught the way the Bible teaches it. Religion desires to mix law and grace, for we want mercy when we fall short, but also rules to box in those who are committing sin.

However, the Bible says that the promise of God is made of no effect to those who are of the law,¹⁵⁰ and that the promise is given to us according to grace apart from the law.¹⁵¹

Because of this, people try to serve God through the flesh by keeping rules and focusing on the old covenant law, and when this doesn't work, they get frustrated with the darkness they see. Those who lose sight of grace can't understand that we are never called to fight the darkness. I'll explain shortly.

What rule-based religion does not understand is that we are a new creation, born of God, always in Christ, and we have a new nature that cannot sin.¹⁵² Our flesh can sin, but our spirit cannot. According to the Bible, the law empowers the flesh. Sound odd? Look at **Romans 7:5**

For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death.

¹⁴⁷ Romans 7:5, Romans 5:20, Romans 7:8-11

¹⁴⁸ Galatians 5:18

¹⁴⁹ Romans 4:15 and Romans 5:13

¹⁵⁰ Romans 4:14

¹⁵¹ Romans 3:21, Romans 3:28, Romans 4:16

¹⁵² 1 John 3:9

The law arouses the flesh, which can only bear the fruit of death. That does not mean that our spirit dies. It means the fruit of sin is what will emerge in our lives. The flesh will not and cannot ever produce the fruit of righteousness – regardless of how religious it may try to be. This means that the harder we try to please God through human effort, the more difficult it is to live the life of faith. So, we end up cursing the darkness and fighting against shadows.

But God has a better way. Walk in the light. Look at the simplicity of Jesus' teaching in **John 8:12**

Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life."

Sin is of the darkness. Righteousness is of the light. No one gets rid of darkness by beating against it. If you walk into a dark room, you can't will the darkness out. All of your efforts to fight the darkness will never accomplish anything. Trying harder only means more wasted effort. The solution isn't to curse the darkness, but to turn on the light.

Sin is merely the shadows hiding in areas where light is absent. In fact, darkness is only the absence of light. It has no power. It is the absence of power, just as the cold is the absence of heat.

Religious effort of the law are mere acts of shadow boxing. Even the most experienced shadow boxer cannot defeat a single shadow. All he can do is create more shadows by getting in the way of the light. Consider **2 Corinthians 4:6**

For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to *give* the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Let's add one other passage to this discussion. Also look at **1 Peter 2:9**

But you *are* a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;

None of these acts of light illuminating the darkness comes from you or your efforts. God called you out of the darkness and into the light of Christ. When you answered His invitation, your life changed. No longer are you groping in the darkness, because your eyes have been opened by His light. Yet because you live in a body of flesh, there are many areas where the light still needs to reach. And no matter how much you rage against your sins, failures, and

weaknesses, they remain in the shadows. You can take the broom of religion and sweep the darkness until you are tired of trying, but it will accomplish nothing.

Rollercoaster Christianity is just stepping in and out of the shadows of your flesh. Have you ever felt like you were up one day and living like a victorious Christian, only to slide back down the next day when your weaknesses took over again? We all have been there. It can be frustrating. If you are like me, I spent two decades battling my weaknesses, each time getting more hopeless until I concluded, “This is just the way I am wired. I can’t change.”

But my life did change – after God shined into this dark part of my heart and dispelled the darkness. And then I discovered that the area I had been hiding from Him was only exasperating the problem. But when I surrendered it to Him, it disappeared like a shadow at high noon.

This is why teaching people that God is angry at their sins is so harmful. If only someone had told me that what God really wanted was for me to trust Him with my sin, and that my sin wasn’t what was distancing me from God. My unbelief in His loving grace was causing me to pull back from Him. It was not Him pulling back from me. My struggle against sin was an area of my life that was still in the shadow of the flesh, and the only true solution was to expose this to the light of Christ. So instead of running from God, I should have been running *to* Him.

This is the way God has designed the Christian life. You will never have peace in sin, be able to rest in sin, or find satisfaction in sin. So why would the Christian want to live this lifestyle? The only reason people do is because they have never experienced what it truly means to walk in the light. It’s time to stop worrying about sin and start trusting God enough to draw near to the light of grace.

Sin will die in the light of Christ. We need not focus on the shadows, but focus on the light of Christ. As we learn to walk with Him, His light will take care of the shadows without our interference. Traditional teaching can be a negative force because it takes our focus off of learning to walk in faith, and places it on trying to stomp out shadows. It doesn’t work because it can’t work.

The above passage from 2 Corinthians 4:6 tells us that the light of the knowledge of Christ is what shines in our hearts and drives out the darkness. This agrees with 2 Peter 1:3, which tells us that we have been given all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of Christ.

This is faith. This is what it means to walk in the light and walk in the Spirit. It begins with trusting God with the darkest areas of your life, and then leaving it up to Him to drive these out of our souls. The secret of living the Christian life is NOT overcoming sin

or doing righteous acts. The secret of life is to know Christ. Jesus stated that life is found in knowing Him. Look at **John 17:3**

And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

We find eternal life through the knowledge of Him, and we walk in the light of this life through knowing Him, discovering Him, and learning the promises of life and godliness through the knowledge of Him. This is how we get our minds out of living according to the flesh, and learning the way of life in the Spirit. Consider **Romans 8:6**

For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.

For the Christian, this isn't a warning that you will die spiritually. Once you receive the new life of Christ, that is irrevocable. Eternal life can't die, or it would not be eternal. However, you can reap the fruit of death in the flesh, or you can reap the fruit of life and peace through the Spirit. The Bible teaches that in the flesh we bear the fruit of death – and this warning is given to those who are trying to keep the law.¹⁵³

According to the Bible, the flesh can only produce uncleanness, hatred, contentions, wrath, selfish ambitions and all the things that we desire to escape. Since this is true, empowering the flesh to keep religious practices has the opposite effect than what we desire.

However, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, and self-control. Your soul is like a plant. Even if it has all the nutrients and water available, if it doesn't get enough light, it will struggle to survive. It may try to grow, but like a deprived plant, it will be weak, spindly, and fruitless. A light-deprived plant will grow in all the wrong directions, seeking what cannot be found. If you have ever uncovered a plant that has been in darkness, it has spent its resources on fruitless growth, and the more it tries to grow, the weaker it becomes. It only has pale, weak and skinny branches reaching desperately in all directions, looking for light.

This is why teaching people to be afraid of God saps the life out of them. It causes them to hide from the light and try to grow through their own efforts, and the more they try to grow, the weaker they become, and even what does grow has no chance of bearing fruit. When we run or hide from God in shame, we end up in that lifeless cycle.

¹⁵³ Romans 7:5

But the true gospel of grace teaches us to run to the light when we fall short. It teaches us to trust God with our weaknesses and failures. It teaches us that real faith is to entrust God with our sins. This is why **Hebrews 4:15-16** says:

¹⁵ For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all *points* tempted as *we are, yet* without sin.

¹⁶ Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

This passage does not teach that when you get your life right with God you will be welcomed before His throne. It teaches that when you are at your weakest point, real faith calls you to come confidently to Him to find more grace, and help in your time of need. Your time of need is when you are struggling, not when you have it all together.

Jesus experienced every temptation for the purpose of showing you that there is no reason to feel like a failure before Him. He's not someone who never experienced pain trying to tell the sufferer to stop feeling bad. He is someone who says, "I know what you are going through."

Jesus' nature remained sinless, though he had the same outward temptations we experience. His flesh had the same desires that you and I struggle against. He also knows that your flesh does create that inward response to temptation when the flesh is given control. When our minds are in the flesh, outward temptation becomes irresistible. Temptation is the call to trust in something other than the Lord. It's allowing our emotions to take control because we don't feel in control. It's to attempt to fulfill our lusts and wants by trusting in the flesh instead of God. There are many ways we are tempted to take control out of God's hands and put it in the flesh. Even religious efforts are sin if we are putting the flesh in charge.

Therefore, God leads you out of the fleshly way of thinking into the life of the Spirit, where the inward response disarms the outward temptation.

God's purpose is not to beat you down for giving into the flesh. God's response is to show you the life of grace, where He teaches you how to experience life with Him, so you learn how to begin viewing life from the spirit. Then as you learn how to walk in the light, sin loses power and the light drives out every shadow.

No darkness can defeat even the smallest light. Shadows don't have the power to drive out light. The moment light hits the shadow, darkness dispels. There is nothing to fight. The only way darkness can reign in any area is for light to be absent. Sin and darkness have no power over you. The answer is not to fight against

sin. The answer is to learn how to walk by faith where darkness cannot exist.

This is the process of spiritual growth. For we are learning how to be spiritually minded in a world that exists solely for the flesh. But as you learn how to trust God, you learn how to release a new area of the flesh into God's hand. This happens because you are learning how to receive from God, and each time you receive, a shadow is displaced.

You cannot live in a vacuum. Trying to remove sin by force, is leaving a vacuum where something else will try to fill it. Creating a void will only tempt you to focus on another worldly practice. Or the old sin will return. This is not God's way. God's way is to receive all things from Him, and as you receive, the flesh is replaced by the Spirit and sin dies.

As Christians, we have a lot of shadows cast by the flesh. Depending on what you have experienced in the past, it can seem overwhelming. Not to mention that the voice of condemnation is always pointing at your failures and trying to discourage you from persevering. Condemnation is not of God. As we are ready, God reveals more of His promises, and as you focus on Him, growth is guaranteed, for you are receiving light.

In time, you will look back to where you came from and will be amazed at the hand of God. What seems like slow progress, and sometimes seems like no progress, is the way of growth. Or as God explains the growth process in Isaiah, "Line upon line, line upon line. Here a little, there a little."¹⁵⁴

As a gardener, I can see this principle in the natural world. When I plant a new tree, for a time, nothing seems to be happening. What looks like no growth on the outside is actually a lot of growth below the surface. The roots are establishing, and once they reach a healthy point of maturity, the tree seems to explode into life. There are some trees that grow roots for several seasons before the visible part of the plant begins to come alive.

The same is true for us. We may not see the encouraging outer growth during the times when God is establishing our roots in Him. But that doesn't mean that nothing is happening. We don't determine our spiritual health by outward growth or by comparing ourselves to others. Our spiritual health comes by learning how to know the Lord, and by growing in our knowledge of Christ. Then let God take care of the rest.

¹⁵⁴ Isaiah 28:10

Discussion Questions

Read 1 Corinthians 2:14 - 16, Romans 8:14, and Galatians 5:18

If the church is rule-based, does that distract us from being led by the Spirit?

What does it mean to be led by the Spirit?

Does focusing on the law distract us from walking by faith?

Read Romans 5:20, Romans 7:8-11, Romans 7:5

When the law is in power, does it empower righteousness or sin?

Read Galatians 5:18

Why are we not under the law if we are led by the Spirit?

Can we fight against the shadows of darkness? Why or why not?

How do you get rid of darkness (in your life or in the world)?

Is the Christian life about resisting sin? Explain.

What happens to a light-deprived plant? If we teach people that they must be sinless before they can come to God, what type of growth will they have?

Review Hebrews 4:15-16.

What does this passage teach us about coming before God's throne?

How do we disarm outward temptation?

How do you get rid of sin or bad habits without creating a vacuum in your soul?

When spiritual growth seems slow, does that mean God is not working in us?

Does God Demand Love?

Love gives; it does not demand. Can love be demanded at all? By definition, love is the act of giving oneself to another as a gift. A demanding spirit kills love and removes the opportunity to love. Love never demands, for it draws our heart to willfully give and submit to others.

Similarly, worship is also an act of willful submission from the heart. Worship is the response of honoring someone we respect, and being moved to show reverence to someone we hold in the highest regard.

Here we must distinguish between the world's view of these things and the biblical view. As we studied previously, biblical understanding is born out of spiritual discernment. We are always depending on the Holy Spirit to give us understanding of the scriptures.

When we are instructed to love, it is the word 'agape', which is the love of God that has first been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.¹⁵⁵ Until we first receive the love of God, we do not have the power to love with agape love. The Bible clearly says, "We love God because He first loved us."¹⁵⁶

Our love is a response to the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. God first pours His love into us, and then commands us to take that love and extend it to others. In fact, that is an important demonstration of our love for God. The Bible teaches that love is what manifests (or reveals) that we are children of God. According to the Bible, the evidence that we belong to Christ is that righteousness will begin to work in us, and love will begin to flow out of us.¹⁵⁷

Jesus also affirmed this when He said, "By this all will know you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."¹⁵⁸ That word is agape. So, the evidence that you are God's child is that His agape love is in you, and agape is always outward focused, does not seek its own, does not parade itself, does not behave rudely, does not keep records of wrong, is not puffed up with pride, doesn't envy, doesn't think evil, hopes in all things, endures all things, and agape can never fail.

If this is true, why do so many Christians act in such unloving ways? It's the same reason that many Christians struggle with sin

¹⁵⁵ Romans 5:5

¹⁵⁶ 1 John 4:19

¹⁵⁷ 1 John 3:10

¹⁵⁸ John 13:35

and worldly ways of thinking. Love is of the Spirit, but hate and selfishness are of the flesh – as are all other manifestations of sin. A Christian trying to live out their faith through human effort is living in the flesh. Religious flesh is still flesh. And what does the flesh do with Bible knowledge? According to the Bible, knowledge puffs up the flesh, but love uses knowledge to edify (or build and restore others).¹⁵⁹

The same knowledge can create two completely opposite reactions. Someone using the word in the flesh will become puffed up, hostile, and will use the word to elevate themselves while tearing down others.

Love is the opposite. It takes the word, applies it with gentleness and humility, and it builds our faith while also using the word to build up others. This is why Jesus took the word to the sinners and built them up, but the Pharisees used that same word to destroy. This is why the prostitute heard Jesus' invitation of love and came to the house where Jesus dined, and poured out her soul at His feet. She washed His feet with her tears, dried them with her hair, and then took the most costly possession she had, and alabaster box of precious ointment, and anointed Jesus' head as an act of grateful worship.

Religious people were repelled by the sinner, and their unloving attitudes pushed her away. Yet sinner's had no such fear of Jesus. His agape love drew them to God's power to transform their lives. Not one word of condemnation transformed the prostitutes and sinners around Jesus. But the love of God demanded nothing except to believe on Him, and His love for them. There was no command for the woman to worship Christ. It was her gratitude for His love that compelled her.

Every man in that room judged her when she walked in. Then they turned their judgement to Jesus for allowing such a disreputable sinner to anoint his feet with her tears. One even said, "If Jesus were truly a prophet, He would know what manner of woman was touching Him."

Jesus then compared her response to the Pharisees. Jesus said, "There were two debtors. Their lord forgave both debtors. One owed ten times more than the other. Which of these two would love the master more?"

The Pharisee said, "I supposed the one who was forgiven of the most debt."

Then Jesus acknowledged that this woman, who's sins were great, loved more than the Pharisees who did not see their need for forgiveness. Look at **Luke 7:47**

¹⁵⁹ 1 Corinthians 8:1

"Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, *the same* loves little."

Don't misinterpret this passage. I have heard it taught that Jesus responded to the woman's love, so she was forgiven. That is the opposite of the truth being taught here. Jesus is comparing two people – the one forgiven of little and the one forgiven of much. The one forgiven of little loved little. But the one forgiven of much loved much. The translation leaves a little room for confusion, 'for she loved much'. Some translate this into 'she was forgiven, because she loved much.'

The literal translation would be 'for this reason she loved much', or 'because of this she loved much'. Love was her response to God's loving act of forgiveness.

God does not respond to your love, for His grace cannot be merited. You respond to God's love, and this draws you closer to Him, and the Bible promises, "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." In other words, we respond to God's love, and when we are drawn by His love, God draws nearer to us. The reason God draws nearer to us is because we don't have the strength to draw closer – so God meets us where we are.

It is our act of receiving God's love that empowers us to draw near and experience the deeper relationship God has designed for us to have.

Let's dispel one other misinterpretation of scriptures that throw people into the endless cycle of trying and failing. Under the law, God gave the command, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, all your strength, and all your soul."

When the religious leaders were questioning Jesus, one asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" He was a man under the law and trying to use the law to create his own righteousness. This story is spread out over all four of the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). Jesus pointed back to the law, which the Bible clearly says was designed to defeat us so we recognize that hope must be found outside of ourselves, then the law points us to Christ.

One of the Pharisees said, "Which of these is the greatest commandment?" It's the typical fleshly mindset. If I can keep the best one, then I can feel self-justified. Jesus referenced the command to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

A young man had the audacity to say, "I have kept all of these from my youth up." He was puffed up with religious pride, so now he was going to meet some of the weight of the law. Keep in mind that the Bible says, "If you fail in one thing, you are guilty of the whole law. You are a lawbreaker." Just as in every prison, there is

no status based on which law sent you to prison. You are a prisoner. Period.

Can any person in history say that they have loved God with ALL their heart, mind, soul, and strength? We aren't capable of keeping any of this for a day, much less our lives. If you have ever had a selfish thought, acted with a selfish motive, not acted when you had the opportunity to give yourself away, or had any moment of selfishness in your life, you have fallen short of the law and are a law breaker.

Why would anyone in their right mind want to take this commandment upon themselves? Yet the young ruler with great possessions actually claimed to be in agreement with the law. So Jesus bypassed the harder command to love God, and presented the easier one – love your neighbor as yourself. “If you will be perfect,” Jesus said (referring to this command), “Go and sell all you have and give it to the poor.” It's a reasonable request, for how can he claim to love his neighbor as himself if he had possessions and the poor man did not. Giving a donation didn't qualify, for as long as he had more than anyone poorer than he was, he was falling short of this law.

The man walked away sorrowful. And that is what happens when we present our works to the law. We are proud of our accomplishments, but the law says, “This effort is little more than trash.” Yes, the law is a demanding, relentless taskmaster who accepts nothing short of absolute perfection.

And yet, countless churches teach that you must keep these two commands in order to please God. This is taught because people don't understand that the purpose of the law was to strip away every reliance of human effort so that we can understand that everything is by grace through faith.¹⁶⁰ Everything in the Christian life is a gift of God, not of works so that no one can boast.¹⁶¹ The Bible says that if we can boast in anything it is this, we boast in Jesus Christ. We honor (or worship) Him for what He has done, and know that righteousness is His gift to us.

Our religion takes knowledge and tries to puff ourselves up so we feel like God owes us a blessing, forgiveness, a reward, and to count us as righteous. But when we bring our law-efforts to God, He directs us to the law. And the law destroys all our efforts like sandcastles in the tide.

But when knowledge meets love, everything changes. Love is the foundation everything must be built on. 1 Corinthians 13 describes what love is, and then ends with this statement:

¹⁶⁰ Romans 3:19-20, Isaiah 64:6, Galatians 2:16, Galatians 3:24-25

¹⁶¹ Ephesians 2:8-9

¹³ And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Why is the greatest of these love? Because love is the foundation of everything. The reason the law demanded perfect love is because God is love, and anyone attempting to approach God by their own efforts must be a peer – which also means they must also have perfect love. When we get a glimpse of the law, our boasting melts into fear. The law strips away man's efforts so that we realize that we can bring nothing to God, then we are invited into Christ's love. The moment any sinner believes, God transforms them from fear into His perfect love, where fear dies and we are born into new life. That is when we understand this promise, **1 John 4:18-19**

¹⁸ There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.

¹⁹ We love Him because He first loved us.

Once perfect love has come, fear is cast out of our lives. Those looking to their own works and their love for God will recognize their inadequacies to measure up to the demand of perfection before them. Then it is a fearful thing to stand before God with your only foundation as your ability to fulfill the law. But when we stand on the foundation of His love, that fear cannot remain. Anyone who still lives in fear has not been made perfect in God's love. That person doesn't know and believe in the love God has for them. Look at **1 John 4:16**

And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.

How do you abide in God? By first putting your faith in His love, and then abiding in that love. Bad doctrine teaches you to flee from God when you fall short, but this isn't what God says. God says that it is His job to perfect us, but that cannot and will not happen until we learn how to abide in His love without fear. The moment you fear condemnation, wrath, rejection or the supposed scowl of God, you have stepped out of faith and are no longer abiding in His love. That is when we return to the scriptures and let God assure us with His love.

The greatest thing is love because when we stand upon God's love, we have hope and are walking in true faith. Faith without love is empty. Hope can't exist without understanding God's love for you. How can you hope for something when you don't believe in God's love, but instead are looking for wrath or judgment?

Unity is the byproduct of love. There are currently more than 33,000 denominations and sub-denominations in the world. Yet the Bible says that the church being edified in love will have unity. The problem is not doctrinal differences between us. The problem is that knowledge puffs up, and when that happens, Christians begin valuing their pet beliefs and practices over people. In time, doctrines morph into essential tenants, and any who question are viewed as enemies. The fleshly mind believes it is justified in attacking enemies – especially if you can label someone or some group as an enemy of God.

Yet God even calls us to love our enemies. Then God says, “How can you say you love God if you hate your brother?” Anyone who shows hate while claiming to love God is living a lie.¹⁶²

We hate sin for the same reason God does. Sin is hated because we love the people it is oppressing. God aches to rescue people from sin because He does not want to see the sinner oppressed, damaged, and even destroyed by it. While we were sinners and enemies of God, Jesus died to rescue us from sin.

Now God sends His church to the sinner to proclaim God’s acceptance,¹⁶³ so that people are not afraid to come to Christ where they are set free.

Then God sums up the church’s law with one basic command:

John 15:12

This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

John 13:34

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.

The old letter of the law was removed through the cross,¹⁶⁴ and the New Covenant was born with this new command. Every church, doctrine, and application of obedience to God must be tethered to this foundational teaching, “That you love one another.” To understand this, we must first understand His love for us. Obedience without love is actually disobedience.¹⁶⁵ Obedience cannot be elevated over agape love. Jesus condemned the church of Ephesus because they lost sight of agape love. He stated that even though they did all these seemingly right things, because love has been pushed aside, He will fight against them unless they repent, or return their minds to the love of God.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² 1 John 4:20

¹⁶³ Luke 4:18-19

¹⁶⁴ Colossians 2:14, Romans 7:6

¹⁶⁵ Revelation 2:2-5

¹⁶⁶ Revelation 2:2-5

It doesn't matter what rules you keep or how much you labor for God, nor does it matter what doctrine you adhere to, if you lose focus on this foundational principle of agape love, you are outside of God's will.

The Bible says that even if I speak with tongues of angels and men, have the gift of prophecy, understand all of God's mysteries, have all knowledge, and even if I have faith to move mountains, if I don't have love, I am nothing. If I give all my possessions to feed the poor and even if I offer my life as a sacrifice to God, if I do not have love, it profits me nothing.¹⁶⁷

Jesus affirmed this when sending the Apostle John to address the church. Jesus' harsh words to the church of Ephesus should be taken to heart. This church sounds a lot like today's denominations. They had an abundance of works, labored for God, did not tolerate evil, confronted false teachings and even tested things against the scriptures. All of these are good things, yet Jesus said, "I have this against you, that you have left your first love...repent (or turn back)...or I will remove your light from its place."

They did everything right except one thing – the foundational principle of love.

To the church of Philadelphia (or church of love) Jesus said, "I have set before you an open door that no one can shut, for you have a little strength, have kept my word, and have not denied My name."

The foundation of love gave them strength, pointed to Christ, and taught them how to keep His word.

All of this hinges on one basic truth – that we know and believe in the love He has for us. As I am abiding in God's love, my heart is continually flowing with the work of the Holy Spirit, and then works are driven by love. This is important, for we are not trying to earn God's love by our works, making them a selfish work. Our works are driven by the love we are receiving.

At the end of God's chapter of love (1 Corinthians 13), the Bible says this:

¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

It is love that grows us in Christ. We all begin as immature babes in the faith, but as we are nourished by love, we grow into adulthood. Then we begin putting away childish things, like sin, bickering, selfishness, and negative attitudes. We grow in love.

¹⁶⁷ 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

However, when we stop being nourished, what happens? We stop growing, and because our focus shifts from Him, we began being drawn back into the flesh. Therefore, when teaching creates fear, and detaches us from the Holy Spirit's work of faith – including pouring love into our hearts, we stop growing in faith and begin growing in the flesh. Religion gives the counterfeit of spiritual growth. This counterfeit cannot produce the fruit of the spirit, nor can it produce spiritual adults.

To compensate, spiritual maturity is measured by church attendance, keeping rules, doing church work, being recognized by others, and other surface examples. While these things can be good, if they are not driven by the Spirit's call after being established in agape love, it is merely superficial activities.

Our love for God is a response to Him for the love He is investing in us. Our love for others is the response of our hearts that are overflowing with love we are receiving from God. We are not the creators of love. We are the possessors. We can only obey the command to love after we have put our faith in the love of God, and received it without fear.

In the New Covenant of Grace, God does not demand that we love Him. God calls us to receive His love as a gift. Then our response to God is the overflow of what He is pouring into us. We then receive Jesus' promise that the Holy Spirit will spring up as living waters.¹⁶⁸ This is God's life leaking from us into the world around us. Once I am filled with the Spirit, my natural response is to express His love outwardly to the world around me.

There is no need to demand love from us. God supplies His love to us. The evidence that we are receiving from God is that our hearts are drawn to express that love to others. An empty soul demands, but a full heart overflows with a giving spirit.

¹⁶⁸ John 7:38

Discussion Questions

Read 1 John 4:16 and 1 John 4:8.
Where does our love come from?

What is the difference between man's love (philia) and God's love (agape)?

Read Matthew 22:37-39 and 1 John 4:10, 4:19.
Who was Jesus talking to when He gave the law?
Who is John talking to when He said, "It's not that we loved God, but that He loves us?"

How are we established in love?

How does understanding God's love affect how we relate to God?
How does it affect how we relate to others?
How does it affect how we respond to our enemies?

Read Revelation 2:2-5.
If we keep God's word, but lose sight of love, are we in obedience?

Can you please God if we bypass loving people?

Review John 13:34 and John 15:12
When Jesus was preparing His disciples for the New Covenant, why is love the only commandment He focused on?

Read John 13:35, 1 John 4:20-21, and 1 Corinthians 3:3
If the New Covenant is founded upon love, why is there so much fighting in churches and denominations?

Read Revelation 3:8
To this church founded upon love, why did God promise to open a door to ministry that no one could shut?

Can we minister without God being in it? Will God honor works He isn't empowering?

Why doesn't God honor every work we do for Him?

How do we grow in God's love?

Does God Demand Worship?

Let's dispel another myth, this one is concerning worship. Is God so ego central that He demands people to worship Him? And does God punish those who do not? Or does worship mean something more?

Some feel like they have to force worship because they don't want God to judge them. They go through the motions, but their heart is not in it. Putting on a show is merely an act of fulfilling a demand of a God who will become angry if we don't meet His requirements.

When Stalin took over during the Russian revolution, he required the people to come and hear his speeches. In the book, *The Gulag Archipelago*, one of these events is described. After the speech, everyone gave Stalin a standing ovation – not because they were blown away by his words, but because they were afraid of what would happen if they didn't.

During a lengthy standing ovation, everyone realized that they could not stop. The leadership was watching them, and anyone who stood out as not adoring the leader would be considered an enemy. The crowd applauded for more than two hours while Stalin seemed amused as he basked in his glory. This went on until one exhausted man stopped and sat down. The crowd soon followed his lead and sat down, but this man was taken away to a concentration camp to be punished for his lack of worship.

Many have been taught to view worship as if God were watching to see who will applaud Him and show loyalty. Those who don't do enough may displease God, or even be punished. Religion has turned worship into a blasphemous image of God. Blasphemy simply means to say something false about God. The picture of God demanding to be applauded and demanding worship is a false image of Him. How can we enjoy worship if we are viewing God as a Stalin-like figure?

True worship emerges from freedom, but false worship is a demand for allegiance and often oppresses. Throughout history, many world religions enforce their ideas of worship by brute force and threats of violence and even death. While this forced compliance may be at the core of some religions, Christianity has had its share of black eyes as well.

When we look back at church history, we see examples of the crusades, where kings used military might to force their version of Christianity upon unwilling regions. During the dark ages, Christianized religion used inquisitions to try and execute those

who did not conform to their form of worship. After the reformation movement, the Protestants returned the persecution.

I once had an atheist present me with a lengthy article with details of many atrocities done in the name of Christianity. He said, "I guarantee that if you read this, you won't be a Christian by the end."

I did read it. When he asked what I thought, I said, "According to Jesus, His disciples will be known for their love for one another. The Bible clearly teaches that we are to love our enemies and do good even to those who hate us. Do men who act in ways that are contrary to what Jesus taught prove to you that what Jesus taught was false?"

The issue is not that the Bible teaches a brutal form of worship. The problem is that because people don't understand worship, they can be taught a twisted version of it that is focused on man's will and man's religion, which only vaguely represents what God has revealed through the scriptures.

It isn't worship that God demands. God's desire is for us to see the greatness of His love for us, and when we begin to see His power in our lives, it drives our hearts into worship. It is our heart's response to God's work for us that produces worship.

Let's look at an example I used previously in the Old Testament. The nation of Israel had been oppressed in harsh slavery for over 400 years. God delivered them from the slavery of Pharaoh and his military might. Moses led the newly freed people onto a peninsula to rest. Pharaoh changed his mind about letting them go, and decided to attack God's people.

The enemy pursued the people to destroy them and to bring them back into bondage. The people were helpless to defend themselves, trapped on that narrow strip of land. They had water on three sides, and a pursuing army coming from the direction of the only way of escape.

While the people were certain of their doom, God opened a way of escape where none had been before. It's an amazing piece of history. God had prepared a bridge of coral just deep enough to be out of sight. It was far too deep to reach, but God sent a strong east wind to blow, and it pushed the water back to reveal His plan that had been hidden long ago. The people fled through the wall of water to safety, but were given an interesting word of instruction. Do not be afraid, but see the salvation of the Lord. Look at your enemies, for after today, you will never see them again.

The enemy's chariots became mired when they were in the midst of their pursuit, and once the people were safe, God stopped the wind, and the water returned with brutal force to destroy every person in the pursuing army.

The people who had been watching the destroying army coming toward them and asking, “Has God brought us here to die?” saw an amazing turn of events. Instead of being destroyed, they witnessed God destroy the force that had come to destroy them.

While they stood there amazed, a song of salvation began and the entire nation began to worship God and declare with uplifted voices the glory of God’s mighty hand to save them.

Worship simply means to bow, or fall upon one’s knees in acknowledgement of someone’s honor, authority, or power. Praise is a declaration of the worthiness of someone’s actions. It is to declare approval of what has been done. A person can bow their knees in compliance to forced worship, but never bow their hearts. This is meaningless reverence and worthless religion. Someone also can bow their hearts in worship without moving their physical body. True worship is of the heart.

This can be seen in the deliverance by the sea. The people stood in awe of God’s power and glory, and this immediately birthed a song of praise in their hearts.

Never focus on false worship. If you lack the spirit of worship, faking the motions means nothing. Jesus stated that the time was coming (a time we are now in) when true worshippers will lift their hearts in the spirit. Jesus then said, “Those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth.”¹⁶⁹

If our hearts lack worship, the problem isn’t resolved by going through the motions, or faking it until you make it. It is an inability to see the greatness of God, and His work on our behalf. God reveals Himself to us through our spiritual lives. Sometimes the evidence can be seen through the physical world around us, but without spiritual eyes to see, our view is limited at best. At worst, we don’t even have the power to acknowledge Him.

Sometimes, because we are looking at the world through the eyes of flesh, we are blinded by our will for things to be different, and can’t see the open door God is creating. We are so busy focusing on the problem before us that we can’t hear His voice to follow the path He is leading us toward. How can I worship when I am fighting a battle God intended to handle Himself? Sometimes I can’t worship because I can’t see the truth of His work in my life. If I am fighting spiritual warfare in the flesh instead of walking by faith in the spirit, my problems will seem too great, and gratitude will be absent.

Once I let go of my will and start seeking His will and allowing Him to guide me, I find the power of God. I also will discover the path where His plan leads me through the low points of life and

¹⁶⁹ John 4:23-24

toward His time of renewal. This has been planned for me from the beginning, but can only be found through eyes of faith. It's as the Psalmist states, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and staff comfort me."¹⁷⁰

God uses the picture of leading sheep as a metaphor of how He leads us. The rod of God is what strikes our enemies and protects us from his attacks. The staff was a hooked rod that the shepherd used to keep the sheep from wandering off. If the sheep wanders out of the safety of the flock, the shepherd reaches out with the hooked staff, and gently pulls the sheep back toward safety.

Unfortunately, religion teaches the opposite. We are taught that God uses the rod to strike His people when they step out of line, but God does not want His children to be afraid of Him. He wants us to find comfort in Him. The inward prompting of the Holy Spirit is the staff that guides us. This is why Jesus said the Holy Spirit convicts us with our righteousness.¹⁷¹

When we start wandering away from the safety of righteousness, God convicts us by revealing our righteousness so we can see the contradiction between our life and the invitation of temptation.

As we grow in truth, our hearts are inspired to worship. The more we understand truth, the closer we grow to the life of faith, and the more we can see God's work in our lives. The more we understand this life of promise, the more we can see God's power to complete His work in us, which creates worship. Then the more we see the work of God in our life, our heart springs forth in praise. It's hard not to praise God when you are overwhelmed with the evidence of His work and calling for you, and how He is changing you into His glory. It's hard not to worship when you get glimpses of God's power in you.

When we lose focus on our spiritual lives, our eyes will focus on the limitations of this world. Even God's people, who were rescued from the pursuing army, became distracted and lost sight of God's work. It's easy to see how blind they were, but we often fall into the same faithless ways of viewing life. We get distracted by this world and lose our awe of God. Then worship fades, and grumbling creeps in.

The people grumbled because they were wandering through the desert, didn't have easy access to water, struggled to find food, and then complained because they were tired of the type of food God provided.

¹⁷⁰ Psalm 27

¹⁷¹ John 16:8

God sheltered them from the hot sun with a cloud in the day, and gave them light at night. But they soon forgot to be thankful, and took God's power for granted. God gave them water from a rock, which gave them praise for a moment, but this was quickly forgotten. God gave them manna from heaven, but they soon grew tired of it and complained that Egypt had better food.

The loss of worship was not because God wasn't at work. It was because human nature quickly gets distracted by the world. The same is true for us. Life never stops producing problems and hardships. A crisis can quickly take our eyes off faith, then we fix our focus on problems. Yet as we learn to look expectantly to God, even problems can lead to worship.

Several times people worshiped Jesus as they presented their problems. A leper worshiped Jesus and said, "Lord, if you are willing, You can make me clean."¹⁷² A ruler worshiped Jesus saying, "My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her and she will live."¹⁷³ A foreigner came into the country with a possessed daughter. She came to Jesus and worshiped Him saying, "Lord help me."¹⁷⁴ A demon possessed man who had been untamable came and worshiped Jesus during his need of deliverance.¹⁷⁵

All of these received healing for themselves or family members. They worshiped because they saw and believed in Jesus' power to perform His word.

This is what we all desire when it comes to dealing with the trials of this life. We may begin by worshiping God as a response to His answer to our need, but there is a better way. These people believed before they saw. They worshiped in spirit and truth knowing God had the power. Compare this to the fleshly-minded people who came out of slavery. They could not believe until they saw. Then they worshiped what God had done.

It is as Jesus told Thomas, who said, "I will not believe until I see," referring to Jesus' resurrection. Jesus came and showed Thomas the scars and then he worshiped Jesus. Jesus said, "You have seen and you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

The real power in worship comes from believing in God's willingness to fulfill His promises, and worshiping with expectation – which is of faith. That is when you are fulfilling the call to worship in Spirit and truth.

¹⁷² Matthew 8:2

¹⁷³ Matthew 9:18

¹⁷⁴ Matthew 15:25

¹⁷⁵ Mark 5:6

God indeed reveals His power to us while we are weak in faith. We see His work and are inspired to worship, and there is value in this. It is always good to acknowledge what God has done. However, as we grow in truth and the knowledge of Christ, worship grows into an expectation of God's power, and a trust that He will fulfill every promise. True worship acknowledges God's power during the trial knowing that He promised to lead us through it, and cause everything to work for our good.

Faith is the confident expectation of what is not yet seen. My human eyes cannot see how my problems will work toward my good, but faith trust God and bows in worship knowing that what I can't see does indeed exist in God's plan. Then I am willing to walk with Him while waiting with expectation. I know as I seek Him and His ways, He'll lead me to discover my answers, which is a treasure hidden for me to find. That is when I experience worship in a more powerful way.

It isn't worship that God demands. It isn't God's ego that needs to be stroked. God wants us to see His purpose for our good, and for us to believe in His power to accomplish what He said. Worship is us acknowledging that power. Praise is us acknowledging what He has done for us.

A heart grounded in worship and praise will also abound in joy. And never forget, praise and worship is not your gift to God. It is a response to what God has and is preparing to pour out upon you. You are edified in worship, and God delights in raising you up. He lifts your heart above life's problems, and draws you deeper into the fellowship of faith, where you can experience more of His love for you.

What God desires is for you to see the greatness of His work for you. The scriptures state that God put so much thought in your life, that if you counted His thoughts, it would be greater in number than the sands of the seas.¹⁷⁶

At the heart of worship is the revelation of God's love and work on your behalf. A true worshipper has had their eyes opened to see the power of God invested in them, and the gratitude of their heart drives them into the joy of worship. The Lord wants you to see His goodness toward you, and the evidence that you have found the joy of the Lord is worship!

¹⁷⁶ Psalm 139:17-18

Discussion Questions

Prior to this study, what was your picture of worship?

Do you feel that God is angry or upset with you if you lack worship? Why or why not?

Why has religion forced people to worship according to their ideas throughout history?

If someone expresses worship different than you, are they wrong?

What caused the people escaping Egypt to worship God?

What interferes with worship in our lives?

Read John 4:23-24

What does it mean to worship in Spirit and truth?

In what way does seeing God's protection lead you to worship?

What causes our heart of worship to fade into grumbling and complaining?

How does understanding the future promises of God lead us to worship?

What causes you personally to worship?

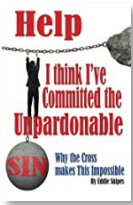
Does God demand worship? Explain.

Is there something in this book that helped you understand your walk of faith more clearly?

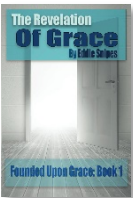
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