

My First Steps With Jesus

A guide for everyone who wants to grow closer to God



Camden Ross

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This book is loosely based on, and draws heavily from the classic, public-domain book, "Steps to Christ" by E. G. White, first published in 1892.

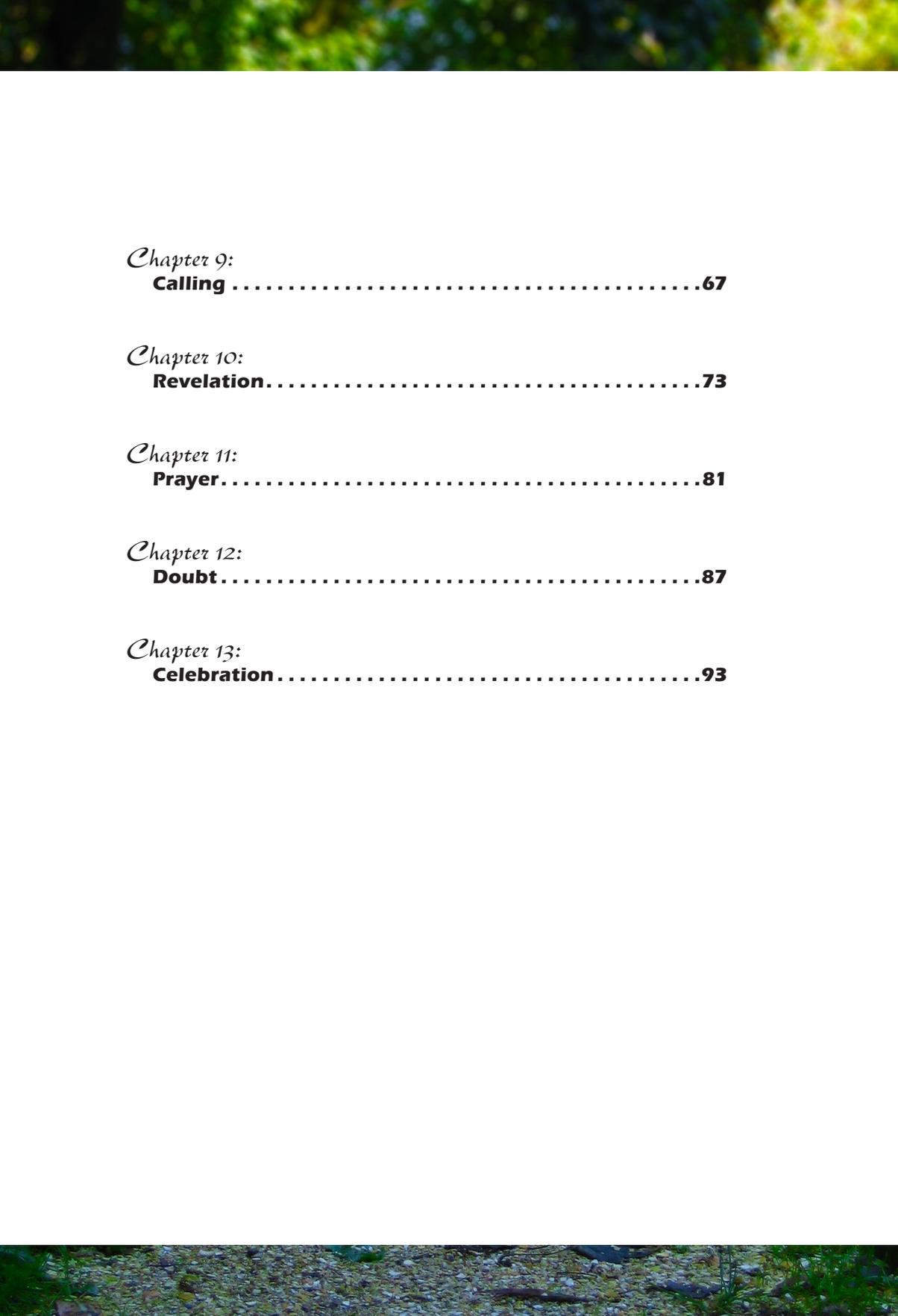
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Introduction:

Overloaded

As we blaze trails into the future, we are becoming more and more connected with each other and the concept of the ‘personal brand’ is growing. For those who have not heard of this term, it is when a person brands themselves as an expert in a particular field using their name as the brand. Examples are with financial coach Dave Ramsey, business consultant Brian Tracy, and motivational legend Zig Ziglar. These names have come to mean more than just the opinions of one particular individual—they stand for ideals that have become greater than any of them would have dreamed of at the beginning. (*Jesus Christ also had a ‘personal brand’ but He approached the concept from a completely different angle than we do today.*)

With the growth and boom of the personal brand, primarily fueled by the Internet revolution, we are seeing information becoming more and more readily available as each new person is bringing a unique take on their field of specialty. This information age revolution is wonderful; however, it also has some dark sides as well.

With the growth of information’s availability, we need to find ways to wade through the sea of information to find the information we are looking for. In the realm of the Internet, search engines have done the majority of the heavy lifting, and they do their best to find the best sources of information for what we are looking for, but even a simple Google search will yield millions of results for whatever we are wanting to find.

As the world shrinks while the population grows, the personal brand will both transform and clutter our lives further.

The dilemma we see when we look at the ocean of information is that it can easily consume us and we look similar to a deer, paralyzed and staring into the headlights of an oncoming vehicle. With the wealth of information comes the lack of time. With the lack of time comes burnout and with burnout comes depression.

There are ways to curb the negative trend. One way is engaging in regular periods of rest. This is vital—more so today than ever in history. Discerning how you actually spend your time is another way to curb the negative effects of this trend—when you feel as though your time has been used wisely, you will be less likely to feel guilty over time wasted.

However, with the information, talents, and knowledge we have been given, we must actually find appropriate outlets to use these gifts we have been entrusted with. Like a river becomes a lake if given an open area to fill, the same lake will become contaminated with bacteria and algae if not given an outlet to channel its water into. In other words, we must recognize the skills we have, and learn how to apply them in our lives to help others; otherwise, we will become stagnant.

This can directly tie into the area of information too. With more and more people, myself to some extent included, building personal brands, the temptation is to become an ‘info-holic’ (*someone who is addicted to gathering information*). On the low end of the spectrum is the person who has to be included and be a ‘hub’ for all things ‘gossip’ related. On the upper end of the spectrum is someone who must have all their questions answered, all the problems solved, and all issues dealt with before committing to anything. One end is shallow talk; the other end is paralysis of will.

In the past few years, I have seen some of this played out in my own life. I’ve read many books, subscribed to lots of newsletters, and learned countless new pieces of information; however, I had no outlet to channel this growing lake of information. I soon began ignoring 90% of the new content that was being delivered my way—primarily because I didn’t have the time, energy, or motivation to actually do anything with it.

How does one actually solve this problem? As we have mentioned earlier, rest and discernment are ways of moderating the severity of the issue; however, another way is actually the personal brand—and we can see the converging of technology, our internal need to be valued and loved, and the overwhelming wave of information creating the perfect climate for this seed to grow.

But while personal brands are growing in popularity, the quality of the majority of the content they provide will decline. This brings back to the focus a need for discernment. Everyone has an opinion, and opinions, while they feel completely valid to each individual, can be based on ideas that are separate from facts. To protect our minds from overload, especially as we blaze ahead into the unknown, connected with our neighbors and an information-rich future, we must pre-decide what we are going to stand on and return to as an anchor to test the validity of the information. For me, the anchor will always be the Bible that I believe is God's Word and one of the several ways that He has revealed Himself to humanity.

In the following chapters in this book, we will spend time helping each of us craft a solid connection to the anchor of the Bible. The ocean of information is vast, but with the Bible as both our anchor and our compass, we can navigate our slice of history and become the men and women that we were created to be!

"So why do you keep calling Me 'Lord, Lord!' when you don't do what I say? I will show you what it's like when someone comes to Me, listens to My teaching, and then follows it.

"It is like a person building a house who digs deep and lays the foundation on solid rock. When the floodwaters rise and break against that house, it stands firm because it is well built.

"But anyone who hears and doesn't obey is like a person who builds a house without a foundation. When the floods sweep down against that house, it will collapse into a heap of ruins." (Luke 6:46-49).





Chapter 1:

God

"Only fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, and their actions are evil; not one of them does good!" (Psalm 14:1).

God.
Does God exist?

If so, 'who' is God, or 'what' is God?

What effect does God have on my life?

People face these questions at different stages of their lives. People face these questions with different theologies, different experiences, and vastly different conclusions.

Many people, when faced with the overwhelming wealth of options and ways to view the idea of God, simply throw their hands up into the air and conclude that either everyone is right—in their own respective minds—or that no one is right. Some might take the logic further and say that because every option is out there, from the possibility that no God exists; to there being one Supreme Being; to every one of us humans, animals, and plants all are "God" when we are united; that everyone is 'right', because the truth about God can never be 'proven'.

So what are we, as rational and logical human beings, to do when we must draw a conclusion about "God" when the word and the concept is not grounded in "fact"?

I cannot tell you that I have all the answers, because I don't. I don't even come close; however, what I will share with you is one view—a view that counters almost all the other worldviews around today. While some of its aspects look similar to some of the main worldviews around today, the foundation of this worldview is so different from what is present today, that it has the power to transform your mind when it comes to who or what God is, or if God even exists.

Most worldviews acknowledge a deity, energy, force, or power that exists that is greater than we are, and many have requirements that we must do. Most of these worldviews classify us as limiting ourselves, through things like habits, beliefs, and the example of others. In these worldviews, it is our responsibility to learn how to improve ourselves, how to better ourselves, and it is our responsibility to grow mentally, physically, and spiritually.

Most worldviews are ready and willing to say that we are not where we should be, and it is our personal and collective goal to move in the direction of our destiny. Most worldviews differ on the end-goal, but they are united when showing us that we don't measure up.

There is one major worldview that is different from the rest. In this worldview, we are not striving to find God, but instead, God is striving to find us.

Now you might say, "Cam, that is impossible or ridiculous. God looking or seeking me? I'm right here. He knows where I am. If He really needed to look for me, He must not be a very powerful God. If I was able to hide from Him, that would limit my impression of Him as being all-knowing, all-powerful, or present everywhere. A God that has to look for me is not much of a God."

And you would be correct—unless this God is more concerned in your freedom of choice and on the value of love that He will avoid anything that would change that, or sway your freedom. What if, instead of God seeking you because He needs to find you, He is really seeking you and giving you opportunities, and lots of them, to find Him?

This is the worldview that I want to share with you as we work through this book.

Before we begin, I imagine many of you may believe God to be an energy, or simply a 'force' in the universe, and the idea that God is personal, or even a 'being', completely clashes with this mindset. Instead of writing me off as a nut, imagine with me what God might be like if God was personal and if He did want to relate with you and me. Does this possibility even make you a little curious?

Think with me for a moment. "God seeking after me." "God is interested in finding me." "God wants me to become all that I can be and He wants to help me achieve this goal."

These ideas alone can inspire the curious person to move forward, and because I am sure you are curious, let's begin!

One of the most overwhelming ways that God has shown Himself to us is through nature—through plants, animals, and areas where less human life is present. What can nature tell me about God? Isn't nature just a part of God or an evolution of organisms? What about all the dangerous conflicts in nature? Are you trying to tell me that God is dangerous too, that I should avoid Him, or that He is at war with Himself like cats and dogs tend to want to fight?

If we want to learn about God, we can begin by looking at nature, both at the big picture of nature, and at some of the smaller aspects too. Starting with the big picture, we can see God is a God of systems and structures. We have various ecosystems, all interconnected, and all that sustain and reproduce life. We can see that God likes systems and that His design is very interconnected—like the soil giving nutrients to plants that provide us with food, and a host of organisms that break down our waste back into nutrients for the soil—we are all interconnected, even if this is not entirely how most of us would like to picture our existence.

Moving to a much smaller scale, we can see that God also values beauty. In a strictly evolutionistic mindset, the idea of variety in even the color of flowers will slowly fade away over time as one color becomes more efficient at reproducing itself—perhaps that color is yellow as the dandelions in my front yard seem to consistently persist above most other plant-life. We have a variety of colored flowers and plants and God gave us this beauty for our enjoyment. We have learned over time how to manipulate plant-life to bring different results, but every modification that we make, or that exists in nature, has its strengths and weaknesses.

God also values variety. Think what life would be like if we only ate one combination of food a day. For a while, I personally tried this as I was dieting to get healthier, but after several months of eating similar foods day after day, the lack of variety—especially when there were plenty of options available—got to me and I caved into a diet that had more than my select 8-10 healthy foods. God loves variety, because He gave us options and choices in the hundreds of types of fruit and vegetables, to the many different types of grains and beans.

God loves us and He wants the best for us; however, there is a catch. This catch isn't that God is going to play a trick on us and deliver bad when He has shown us good. This catch is that God has an enemy who would love to turn all the blessings of God into curses.

The enemy would have us believe that God is nothing more than a cosmic, distant ruler who might have been interested in us at one point in history, but that point is far gone, and we have to make it on our own. The enemy of God could be said to pay much more interest in us than God does, although for those whose eyes are open to see, this idea is an obvious lie.

God's enemy didn't start out that way, but when he didn't get his way, he rebelled and now he would like for nothing more than for us to rebel with him and run from God.

He really doesn't care what direction we are going as long as it does not lead back to God. Like following a straight line from point A to point B, God's enemy doesn't care what direction we travel as long as where we are at point A does not lead to point B where God is.

“Wait a minute, Cam! Now there are two entities that we must deal with? A good one and a bad one? I'm not all convinced that God exists, and you are trying to convince me that He has an enemy as well?”

That is the case, and I want to point out that God is not as clear to you and I because of the tricks of His enemy. God is stronger than His enemy is, but His enemy has countless tricks and deceptions to try to cloud this fact. God values truth, honesty, justice, love, mercy, and above all the freedom of choice. In contrast, we would not have enough pages in this book to list all the tricks and deceptions available to the enemy. The 'challenge' God has is finding us through the mazes of our choices, our beliefs, and through the ways the enemy has deceived us. I put challenge in single quotes, because it is more a challenge for us than a challenge for God.

Look back at where we started our discussion. There is confusion and no definitive answer regarding God. The list of possibilities could fill books and libraries. However, where we sit now is the question of whether we are destined to become like God, whether we have no hope, or whether God is diligently seeking to break through the maze of confusion and lies in our minds trying to wake us up to see Him.

We can find some answers in nature. For all the thorns that are present, we also see beautiful flowers. For all the danger and harsh conditions, we are able to see forms of life flourishing. This reveals to me that we do have hope, and the beauty in nature's danger is a way for us to see God breaking through the 'thorn bush' of deception.

However, part of the discussion must center on the challenges. One of the greatest deceptions in life is that everything should be handed to us with no effort on our part. This is a great deception because it devalues our lives. When we face challenges, we value our lives. When faced with a loss of a loved one, a job, or a dream, we are able to learn how to best value what we still do have—life. Above my computer monitor at home I have the statement “Everything worth achieving involves a challenge.” A life with no challenge is not really life. God actually brings challenges into our lives to help teach us how to really live, how to value life, and how to help others.

The enemy’s deception is that God brings challenges into our lives to break us, because God hates us, and because God’s goal is for us to suffer. Everything the enemy does is an attack on God, and we must not fall into his traps, because in the trap we feel as though God doesn’t care and we truly lose hope.

There are two additional ways that God has revealed Himself to us, both are interconnected with each other, and the sad thing is that God’s enemy has done everything possible to discredit or distort both of these things.

The first is the Bible. The second is the person, Jesus.

What is fascinating about the Bible is that it seems to have its own collection of beliefs and followings. Look online and read hundreds, if not thousands, of different viewpoints on any of hundreds of belief spectrums.

One reason that God’s enemy dislikes the Bible and Jesus is that they both call him out by name. They both call him “Satan”, and they both call his actions and deceptions “sin”. Satan would have us believe that he does not exist. In some cases, he is OK with identifying sin, but when he defines sin, it never leads to a Savior. Satan always uses the idea of sin as a measuring stick to keep us further from God—and he is consistently looking for ways of helping us stay down or climb the wrong ladder of beliefs.

I honestly don’t claim to know the truth, but as I have learned and grown with the understanding that God loves us and He is seeking us, life has made more sense, and when I read about Jesus in the Bible, Jesus’ teachings seem to make more sense when viewed with the belief that God is searching for us. Jesus describes His mission in life like this: “[God] has anointed Me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free.” (*Luke 4:18*).

There are dozens of different ideas surrounding who Jesus was. However, when we look at His life as it is in the Bible, only two options exist because of Jesus' own words and teachings: Either He is the Son of God, as He claimed a number of times and in a variety of ways, or He is the biggest deceiver of anyone who has lived on this earth. If He is a deceiver, He has done a masterful job of dividing history, of shaping western culture, and of giving us a very attractive and loving God when God is really not like that. If He is a deceiver, we must discredit Him entirely and never use His teachings in our illustrations or our life again. If Jesus was a deceiver, He lied to us on numerous occasions and nothing He said can be trusted.

However, if Jesus is not a deceiver, then we must accept His claim of divinity—even if we have no idea what that means or how it is possible. If Jesus is the Son of God, He rightly deserves to be the defining point in history, He rightly deserves a solid place in all culture, and He showed us in complete accuracy God's love for us: how God loves us, how God longs to save us, and how God is passionate about finding us.

If you are like I was when I started, something in you doesn't like some of the claims that I am presenting. It seems too constrictive, too restrictive than God should be. If this is you, then I invite you to look at this situation as a man named Pascal did.

Pascal was a French mathematician, physicist, inventor, writer, and philosopher who lived in the 17th century. Pascal reasoned that believing in God has everything to gain and nothing to lose.

For example, suppose someone believes that God exists and they end up being wrong when life ends. Living life as though God existed would have had benefits, and morality, and purpose, and hope, and if that is all that was gleaned from life, then it would be still considered a successful life.

However, if someone denies God, or denies even the possibility, and they are wrong in the end, then they have everything to lose—both during the course of their life and any potential rewards after.

While believing that God exists is a good first step, the next step is learning more about Him. It is possible that I am wrong. I am a human and I have not always been right about things. What I will challenge you with is to walk forward in our journey together. Take an objective look at what I present in this book. It is possible that you leave without having learned anything; however, what is more

likely is that you will learn something, and depending on where you start, your whole spiritual life may be transformed—not because of me, but because you will have found God seeking you out. You will have moved out of your own way and let God transform your life and your heart. You might thank me, and in turn I will point you to God, to Jesus, because He is the ultimate goal in life!





Chapter 2:

Sin

*"Trouble chases sinners, while blessings reward the righteous."
(Proverbs 13:21).*

At the beginning of time, humanity was perfect.

Many of the seemingly countless number of worldviews have a beginning, and the worldview that we are looking at in this series does too. The God who loved us enough to create us made us perfect, and He placed pieces of His image into us.

What happened before the beginning ended up shaping humanity's destiny. At the beginning of time, God already had Satan as an enemy, and Satan was banished from his home with God. Before the beginning, Satan was second only to the Godhead, but he lost the serving heart, and instead, began lusting after power—to take God's place and role for himself. When this feud could not be solved, God banished Satan and all those who would follow him out of their home with God.

In the sequence of events, this could not have happened at a worse time, because it was at this stage in God's rule that God was preparing to start time and fashion the world we now call home. It was to earth that God sentenced Satan. God gave the first humans a perfect life, a perfect heart, and the freedom of choice. What the records tell us is that it didn't take them long to become curious, then deceived, and finally infected by sin.

God desired us to live perfectly, and He impressed in the essence of who we are the desire to live according to His perfection. Everything was set for humanity, the pinnacle of God's creative work, to take their place as caretakers of the earth and of nature.

At the beginning of time, Satan was not only banished to earth, but to a single tree on the earth. It would have been easy to say no, to walk away from the prison of God's enemy, but instead, our earliest ancestors were curious where they shouldn't have been, and it cost our race perfection.

It wasn't the act of eating fruit that caused sin, as much as it was the chain reaction that began with being deceived, and choosing to take an action that wasn't in God's plan. The freedom of choice has been one of our greatest assets, but it is also our greatest pitfall. Our decision at this early stage of our race has had seemingly eternal consequences.

However, some things were not lost when sin entered. One of those things is the desire for perfection, another is the question in our hearts about whether there is more to this life than this life—a question of purpose.

The problem then amplified itself: What should happen with humanity now that humanity is no longer perfect? Now that humanity has been tainted with sin and no longer perfect, humans would never be able to reach their original position. Even finishing one's life by living according to God's way (*being perfect from this point forward*) isn't enough because the past has mistakes.

While this is a problem for us, God did have another way. As we touched on in the first part, this viewpoint is one where God has a seemingly infinite love for us—or in other words, a love so powerful that we cannot grasp how much love it really is. What began as Plan A (*having the intellect and reason of God's way be more appealing and rational to humanity, and showing the universe how ridiculous Satan's proposition was*) became Plan B (*showing humanity and the rest of the universe God's love by opening up another way because humanity fell for the sin deception*).

Earth and humanity now had the same problem that heaven (*God's home*) had. When Satan rebelled against God, heaven was divided. Some of God's workers in heaven sided with the interesting claims of Satan, while most could see through it. What made the situation worse on earth is that with time just beginning, and our first ancestors failing, we have no idea what perfect even looks like. In heaven, there were millions—probably more—of angels and they all were much more familiar with God's ways than we currently are. Some sided with Satan but most did not. On earth, we have no idea what a perfect human should be like; we have no idea how we were created to be. We only have our minds and history to describe perfection—and history only seems to teach us of our failures as a race.

While humanity was still perfect and we were following Plan A, we had the opportunity of interacting with God in a visible way. Being so far removed from that time, we have no idea what this interaction was like, but once sin entered our experience, we now feel a tendency to avoid God. This is the evidence of sin working in our hearts, and whether it distracts us from the things that matter, or it tricks us into stopping short of finding the truth about God, sin has always pulled us away from wanting to know God better.

This ‘fear’ of God—this desire to avoid and run from Him—is the real reason that we cannot reach heaven. If it were not for God’s perfection, and the perfect society in heaven that is completely other-serving with no hint of selfishness, we could feel at home there. God’s perfection and His glory that shines through all of heaven is too radiant for us to bear. We would have no place to run to, and all the help and selflessness of heaven’s society would drive us crazy because it is completely counter to the sinful nature in our hearts.

Because of this, God does not keep us out of heaven. Instead, our own sin-filled condition keeps us from even wanting to go there. God wants us cured—really freed—from sin, but because our choices will always lead us further into sin, God needed to truly free us by showing us that we do have another ‘choice’. Only by exercising our freedom of choice and choosing to look at God’s plan, can God begin the process of working in our lives to recreate our heart and mind into one that better reflects His.

Where we are stuck is that without God’s power working in us, we have no power—or even willpower—that is able to change us on our own. While willpower and choice do have their place in our transformation, the real act of restoring our lives and hearts is an act of God working on us. It is only through God working in us and replacing our tainted heart and character with His that we can ever hope to be transformed into the men and women we were created to be.

Jesus came to this earth for many reasons—probably more reasons than I will ever understand. One of the reasons was to give us an idea of what God is like—a Being that Jesus often refers to as our ‘Father in Heaven’. Another reason was to take the punishment that we deserve for our acts of sin and our mistakes.

When our earliest ancestors failed, our freedom to choose between God and Satan disappeared. While we had the illusion of free will and choice, all our choices would lead us further from God. Even when we made good choices, without God pursuing us, and without God sending Jesus to reveal God to us, we would have no idea where to turn and what to believe. Think where we are today, with

an almost infinite variety of religions and systems of belief. This is ultimately the result when God seems silent—and this is currently the result of Satan clouding God’s truth from us.

Jesus came to give us another way. Not only did He come to show us the Father’s love, He also came to restore freedom of choice to our race. He added back to the menu of options the ability to choose the Creator-God—the perfect God whose standard is perfection. It isn’t that God is testing us with a multiple choice questionnaire with an infinite number of options; instead, God knows there is only one way to live that brings true happiness, joy, fulfillment, and satisfaction for the long term—for the ‘life-term’. Looking back at our example from the previous chapter, there is only one straight line that can connect point A with point B. Any other straight-line option will miss the mark and then begin to lead us further from point B than we started.

Some of us—as I did at first—may jump to the conclusion that we must work at developing a good character, positive desires, and a meaningful purpose in order to ‘redeem’ ourselves. This is a masterful deception, because without God’s Spirit working in us teaching us spiritual truth, we have no idea even what spiritual truth looks like. One needs to look no further than to history, and to the countless ways that religion and the lack thereof has twisted culture away from love and personal responsibility to see that our best intentions may still be missing the mark.

This desire to achieve God’s approval on our own successes stems from the fear that we believe that we have failed in too many ways and at too many times for God to be willing to take us back. We fear that our past mistakes have permanently cut us off from God.

This leaves us in a place where we desire to understand God and the world we live in, but also in a place where we fear actually meeting God, and where we are scared that our past mistakes have pushed God so far away that He has no desire to come back looking for us. We are stuck looking for answers and being afraid of any answers that might show up.

This is the curse of sin in our lives, because our desire to know more clashes with our sinful nature’s fear of God. Jesus came to invite us to come back to God. He came to show us the Father’s love. He came to save us from ourselves.

Jesus also came to warn us that sin has punishment associated with it. Sin has punishments that are simply the results of not living according to the best way possible—namely, sin brings mistakes that lead to regret. However, more than the immediate results of sin are the lasting results of sin. God has promised a judgment day to punish and destroy sin at the end of time. If any sin is still in us, we cannot escape the destruction of sin on that last day. Our only hope is to lean fully on Jesus, who has no sin and who has offered to cover us with “his blood”, which is a symbolic way of saying “His perfect life”. Jesus has offered to be our replacement when this judgment day comes, and it is the only way that we can escape this event.

Simply put, while these concepts might seem too farfetched to be taken seriously, I suggest that instead of writing them off as nonsense, you dig into the remaining chapters. It is possible that this worldview is wrong, but there is significantly more at stake if this worldview is right. With forever on the line, is it worth researching further?





Chapter 3:

Repentance

“The Lord isn’t really being slow about His promise, as some people think. No, He is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent.” (2 Peter 3:9).

We began by posing the question about God, and by the idea that God is deeply in love with us. We then looked at what sin is and how it has infected humanity. We also looked at who Jesus Christ was in humanity’s history and how He claimed to be the answer to the problem of sin.

When someone begins to grasp the awe-inspiring mission that Jesus came to accomplish, often times they will wonder or ask, “What is my first step? What do I need to do?” It has been this way since Jesus was alive on earth, and most of His followers begin by asking these or similar questions about where to begin.

The answer to this question is the topic of this chapter. This answer is the same answer that Peter, one of Jesus’ original followers, replied to some of Jesus’ first new followers after He left earth. Peter tells the crowd who want to take their first step, “Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God.” (*Acts 2:37, 38*). A little while later and with a different group of people, Peter says the same thing in different words, “Now repent of your sins and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped away.” (*Acts 3:19*).

This leads us to the idea of repentance. This also leads us to asking, “What is it?” and “Why is it important?”

Repenting can mean many different things and it has a number of different uses that vary in how significant or strict of an act it demands. However, with the varying degrees present in our culture today regarding this word, ‘repenting’ began by being an action-oriented word that meant to be genuinely sorry for an action and taking every step necessary to avoid repeating the action in the future. Some people only see repenting as a single action—being sorry, or shallowly saying that they are sorry, but repenting is really a long-term commitment to stay away from an offending action because the offender is genuinely sorry for the wrong that has been done.

Shallow repentance usually stems from simply being sorry for the results of an action. Someone who repents only for the results of their bad choices is not really repenting, because their brain has not connected the dots that the action is actually bad, or more likely, they have made the choice that the bad action is their only option, or the preferred choice in the situation they faced. Someone who has only repented for the results of an action will act in the same way if given the same circumstances as before, with the exception that they might be more secretive about it in hopes that they won't get caught.

Genuine repentance is a genuine apology for the action and any harm it has caused, and a turning of one's lifestyle away from ever repeating the same action again. Someone who is genuinely repenting is promising to those they have wronged that, if the same situation happens again, their decision and choice will be different. They will avoid the negative action completely instead of simply trying to avoid the consequences.

Shallow repentance only leads to short-term victories. Genuine repentance is a long-term choice and action plan.

So why is genuine repentance so important that it must be the first step when someone realizes that they need God and Jesus? The simple answer is that only by moving away from the negative actions, choices, and decisions that we make do we end up growing into being the people God planned for us to be. Another way to say this is that if we continue to stumble in the same set of areas, we will hit a glass ceiling in our growth—we will only be able to grow so far before our actions keep us down.

What tragically happens all around us is when people, who have gained popularity, end up failing because of a bad decision that they made from a series of small compromises. Genuine repentance helps us learn where our weaknesses are, and it provides us with a starting point to change our direction. Genuine repentance helps us plan and focus our lives in a different direction, with a different set of values, and with a higher set of standards and personal guards.

However, genuine repentance is more than we can accomplish on our own. No amount of willpower can protect us against our own minds rationalizing us out of our decisions and resolutions. This is Satan's deceit and he is constantly looking for ways that prompt us to rationalize in our minds why a bad action is really *not* 'that' bad. Satan is always on the lookout to help us trip and stumble, and he is ready to bring challenges our way to test our commitment to change.

Our weapon against Satan is Jesus. The only way for us to have genuine repentance that lasts for the long-term, and for a lifetime, is by asking Jesus to change our heart and characters. By intentionally growing closer to Jesus, we will both learn how to recognize sin that is present in our lives, and we will be able to recognize and shun sin in the choices we make moving forward.

Growing towards Jesus and allowing His Holy Spirit to work on our lives, might lead to guilt, but guilt is not the desired result. If we are feeling guilty about something we are being convicted of, we should be excited, because this is an area that we can grow, and with this growth comes peace and joy.

“Wait a minute, Cam,” I am sure many of you might be thinking, “I don’t buy this. Sure, I understand the idea of genuine repentance, but I have done pretty well for myself so far. I am a goal-setter and a goal-achiever and I am already living my life as best as I can. If I ever feel anything like guilt, I resolve it and move on.”

This is great, and I am excited for you. One thought I want to suggest, and you can take it or leave it for what it’s worth, is that the times when you have felt guilty, and you have taken the steps necessary to move forward, those times are times when God is drawing you closer to Him. God doesn’t require that we know Jesus before He wants to love us and have a relationship with us. If that were the case, everyone who lived before Jesus was born would be out of luck and out of favor with God.

God wants a relationship with you. God wants you to learn about Jesus and accept Jesus into your life, but while that is a necessary step in the process, He knows it does not need to be the first step.

I now present and offer you the idea: all the growth that you have made up to now is God moving in your life and drawing you to Him, because He knew you would be reading this and learning about Jesus. This ebook might be the next step in your growth towards God. God works in countless ways and this may be one of them. I don’t know your history, but I do know that God does, and He values you.

Some of you might be asking questions like, “Does sin really require a sacrifice to free sinners?” “Was all the suffering and humiliation that Jesus endured while on earth simply to demonstrate that He loves us?” “Was the cross necessary for us to be able to live forever?”

These are valid questions, and they show that God is drawing you to Himself and to Jesus. The three big deceptions we are tempted with when seeing these questions are: 1) for us to resist looking deeper, discount the questions, and move on with our life; 2) we acknowledge that the questions exist, and we may conclude with a shallow response, but then stop short of learning about Jesus' role in our lives; and 3) we reject Jesus in favor of the idea that we can accomplish the necessary sacrifices on our own.

The first deception stems from the idea that our spirituality is not important or real in our lives. The second deception is that these things are too big for anyone to understand (*this idea may be true, but this deception leads us to stop short of finding the truth God wants to teach us; we are able to understand a lot more than we might originally believe*). The third deception is a rejection of Jesus. If you reject Jesus, the sin will cost you your life and, while that might not seem that great of a cost in this moment, you are unknowingly giving up on the purpose for your life and you are rejecting true happiness and freedom.

Inside of us is a desire for something more out of life, but it is something most people do not understand. This desire is often annoying, because it never seems satisfied by the things in this world. If we happen to satisfy this desire, it doesn't seem to last very long. However, this desire inside of us is behind the source of the questions we asked earlier and it can actually be satisfied—for the long-term.

This desire is God's Holy Spirit working on our lives and our hearts. He is actively pushing us to look for more in life than what we are currently experiencing. The Holy Spirit is prompting us to examine the results we have been getting from the sin in our lives, and He is helping us realize the deceptions and emptiness that come because of it. The Holy Spirit is prompting us to want more out of life and to reject the ways of sin so that we can have lasting joy and happiness in our hearts. Most of us have looked for satisfaction in things, objects, experiences, money, relationships, and have come up short. This is because we are placing these things ahead of having a relationship with God. Perhaps the closest thing that can lead to satisfaction is by helping others, but service doesn't mean much without a reason or purpose in our lives that is beyond ourselves.

Instead of giving up on finding satisfaction, understand that this desire is God speaking to our hearts. We are able to answer God and show Him that we are seeking Jesus by repenting from our sins, by asking for forgiveness (*which we will talk about in the next chapter*), and by making the conscious choice to model our lives after the life of Jesus. Jesus showed us what a life that is perfectly modeled after the principles of God's law is like. One of Jesus' goals on earth was to

demonstrate compassion and unselfish love, which was one way that He gave us a glimpse into God's heart. Only when we look at Jesus do we see how we are unable to measure up.

There is something else when we look at the subject of long-term repentance. Repentance is turning away from the sin in our lives, and this can happen in one of two ways.

The first way is similar to the shallow repentance that we talked about before, and that is through forcing our will into line. We tell ourselves that we must be good and in order to be good, we must do good things, live a positive lifestyle, and help those who are less fortunate than us so we can ultimately attain perfection. Life becomes a list of actions geared at perfect obedience to the high standards we have set for ourselves, and when we fall short of our goals, we feel the failure is also a failure of our personal value. This first path leads to repentance-goal-setting exercises that are a challenge for our willpower. It is unfortunate that this forced type of repentance is the one most people know, because when failures happen, denial and/or depression soon follow.

The less common repentance is the repentance that turns away from sin, and it is the type of repentance where we ask Jesus to enter our lives and change our character. This type of repentance is both easier and it lasts longer, because we allow Jesus to change our character and our desires and this leads us to lose the motivation to sin later. Without the desire to sin, we are able to live without failing in the typical problem areas that many of us face. By staying close to Jesus, we are clearly able to identify the traps that often cause those who are unaware to stumble. The key difference between these two versions of repentance is that one leads to a legalistic, strict obedience with varying levels of fear attached to it, while the other repentance leads to freedom.

Sins are not all equal, but don't confuse that by thinking that any sin is 'small'. Some sins have obvious outward characteristics, and are easy to see in others. Other sins are inner sins and are almost impossible to distinguish without God's help. Inner sins are especially offensive to God because they are often the more difficult sins to identify—and we often will rationalize them in our minds as 'good' qualities. It is impossible without God's help to see hidden sins such as pride, selfishness, and greed in the mirror. These inner sins stand directly opposite to God's character. God is caring, compassionate, and concerned for others, and these sins focus entirely on serving self. We often rationalize these sins as service to others, but the root issue is still there; the root objective is self-service.

Pride stands completely opposed to God because pride never feels any need. Pride says, “I can do it myself,” and “I have no need for others’ help.” Pride is never satisfied. Pride never acknowledges complete guilt, and if it does admit to some wrong, it will manipulate the situation to shift responsibility away from self and bring focus to self. Pride is especially deceitful because it comes both before a big failure, and it alienates those around us while the stage for failure is being set. When we are done, we are ruined and we believe it is everyone else’s fault. Pride leaves us feeling hopeless and out of control.

What happens if we suspect that there is a sin in our life? What should we do?

Some people believe that they are unworthy of God’s forgiveness and they must earn the right to be heard or taken seriously by God. Some people believe they have gone too far and that God has turned His back on them. These are both lies that Satan uses to keep us from coming to God. The problem with this idea is that we will never be good enough on our own to be able to reach the perfection we believe we need to have in order to turn to God. God knows this and He is willing and waiting to receive us with arms wide open when we are ready to make the decision to turn back to Him. Only God is able to help us. Waiting or procrastinating—looking for a better opportunity or attitude—will result in change never happening. We can do nothing on our own. We must simply come to Jesus just as we are and let Him work with us and change our lives and hearts.

The opposite side of the issue is when people believe that God is infinitely loving (*which is true*), but they conclude that, because of this, He will save everyone—including those who reject His grace. These people often conclude they can go on sinning and God will always look the other way or will forgive without logic or reason because that is what a loving God should do. They forget or ignore one problem with this thought. God sent Jesus to die in the place of sinners. A perfect God who values choice and freedom has to deal with difficult issues and situations, one of which is what to do with people who reject Him and His way. Choosing a life that is apart from God is a choice that people are free to make, but it is a choice that will lead to death in the end—otherwise, Jesus would never have needed to die. The more we study and look at the sacrifice that Jesus made when He went to the cross, the more we can see how God is able to be both just and merciful. The more we grow closer to Jesus, the more we realize our need of Him in our life.

“Wait a minute, Cam! Are you trying to tell me I must live to a higher standard? I see ‘Christians’ all around me and in the media and I am as good, if not better, than they are. I know you are presenting a Christian theological worldview, and I am about fed up with it!”

To answer your objections and questions, I will tell you, “Yes, you need to live to a higher standard and, yes, you probably are as good as many Christians who are visible in the public eye.” However, the big problems with this line of thinking are these.

First, it is sad to think this way, but most Christians have forgotten Christ and, as a result, they will miss the rewards that they mistakenly believe they are guaranteed. Christian living is a journey as much as it is a decision, and while most people understand the choice, they miss the journey.

However, even bigger than most Christians missing out is that *they* don’t really even matter in the end. What matters is that *you* personally know where you stand and who you stand with. Repenting, accepting Jesus, and walking into a relationship with Him is a personal choice, and in the end, that is what matters. Pointing over at a sinner who thought they understood Christianity and trying to rationalize that you deserve what they are getting will not hold up in God’s courtroom, and even if it did, chances are high that you don’t want their reward anyway.

I advise you to reconsider before deciding to procrastinate making the decision to repent and turn to Jesus. Don’t wait to repent from your sins and ask Jesus to create a clean heart in you. This is where many people fail. Life is short and there are no guarantees. There is a significant risk in putting off repenting and submitting to Jesus. Holding on to sin, even if it is “small” or “insignificant” in your mind, could result in terrible consequences. What we don’t consciously move away from, with Jesus’ help, will cause us to trip, fall, and fail in the long run.

Adam and Eve convinced themselves that the simple act of eating from a fruit tree could not possibly end with such significant results as God had said. However, even with the seemingly insignificant act, sin infected humanity and broke the connection between God and humans. Christ’s death on the cross stands as a memorial of what needed to take place to restore the connection.

Disobedience, or sin, against God’s law is never a small or insignificant thing. Every time that someone consciously rejects the grace and prompting of God’s Holy Spirit, their heart becomes harder, and their mind becomes a little more

desensitized to the will of God. When we reject the Holy Spirit's leading, it doesn't just make it easier to reject later; it makes it harder and harder to even discern when the Holy Spirit is prompting us with new truth.

If you are falling into the trap that you will change when tragedy strikes, understand that it might take a while for the fateful tragedy to come. The longer you wait, the habits you have formed will be that much stronger, and it will be that much harder to change. The longer you let genuine repentance wait, the harder it will be to repent, the less likely you will choose to change when tragedy does strike, and your lack of action will cost you God's rewards.

Even holding on to one tiny sin, such as a sinful desire, a selfish character, or a bad attitude, will eventually grow and counteract all the power of the Gospel of Jesus. Every sinful act hardens the heart against God. The person who purposely hardens their heart to God's truth will "reap what they have sowed" and will ultimately get a heart that is opposed to the will of God.

Jesus Christ is ready to set us free from sin—heal us from the disease—but He does not force us to choose freedom. If we decide to hold on to sin and choose, instead, to reject His offer to set us free, what more can He do? We have doomed ourselves by rejecting His love and gift.

We look at others on the outside. It's about all we can do. We are unable to see inside someone else's life. However, God looks at our hearts, our emotions, our confusion, and our internal conflicts, and He is able to see our motives, goals, desires, and dreams. We cannot hide from God, and He is not surprised with anything that we choose to bring to Him. When we come humbly to God, we should pray, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends You, and lead me along the path of everlasting life." (*Psalms 139:23, 24*).

Many people accept an intellectual religion, or a form of godliness, when their heart has not been cleansed. Instead, deal honestly with your own heart and life. Be as intense and determined as if your life is on the line—because the outcome of this decision and journey will determine the fate of your life. Having a false hope and nothing to back it up will be your downfall.

To keep from falling into the trap of a shallow intellectual religion, we must study the Bible prayerfully. By reading the Bible with a relaxed, calm, prayerful attitude, we are able to grow towards Jesus. This growth allows Him to point out areas of sin in our lives that need repentance, and this is our opportunity to repent and grow closer to Him.

As we begin to see the extent of our sin, and as we begin to see ourselves as we really are, we must not give up in despair. It was because of us sinners that Jesus came. It was never up to us to reunite ourselves with God—because as sinners we became unable to make that connection on our own. God, through Jesus, already has taken the first steps necessary in reuniting us back with God by coming to earth as a human so He could bridge the gap that sin created between heaven and earth. His goal is to persuade our hearts—the hearts of His creation—with His love. No human parent could ever be as patient with the faults and mistakes that their children make than God is with us who He wants to save. No one could plead more intensely than God could for us to turn away from our sin. All of His promises and His warnings are displays of His love for us.

When Satan tries to remind you that you are an un-savable sinner, remind him of what Jesus did for you. Admit that you sinned, but tell the enemy that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners’—and I [may be] the worst of them all” (*1 Timothy 1:15*). Jesus became human to save sinners. We all may feel at times that we are ‘un-savable’, but Jesus came and died so that we can be forgiven. The value of Jesus’ sacrifice is enough to reunite us with God—our heavenly Father.

If this whole topic is a little overwhelming, that is ok. The thought that the God of the universe would have a love for us that resulted in Him risking a part of Himself to get our attention is a little unbelievable.

A God that would take the punishment we deserved and place it on Himself is hard to believe. A God that puts us ahead of Himself is a God that inspires us to serve from our hearts.

It is easy to follow a God who loves us this intensely.

Are you willing to continue our journey together and learn more about this God?





Chapter 4:

Confession

"People who conceal their sins will not prosper, but if they confess and turn from them, they will receive mercy." (Proverbs 28:13).

When we think of the idea of confession, many different ideas might come into our minds. Personally, often the first thought that comes with this word is the little wooden booth in a Catholic church where people go and 'confess' their sins to a priest who is behind one of the walls. The person who is confessing shares their heart and where they have failed in their life recently, and then the priest might speak some words of affirmation or encouragement such as, "Your sins are forgiven."

Some other people might have a different idea surrounding this word, and many first thoughts or reactions might be more courtroom-based than spiritually-based. However, once we understand that we have failed many times in our own lives, and we have made a commitment to turn away from the things that pull us away from God, we are to look at the relationships in our lives, and at people we may have hurt, and confess to them that we have said or done wrong.

Before you close the book, please follow along to learn the reason behind this.

Confession is one of the hardest things for people to face. There are many layers of complex reasons for this, but the foundation that all our fears are based on is our pride. We simply don't like to admit we were wrong. Even when we were right, often times for the sake of the relationship at hand, we should admit that we were wrong because it is a sign of true maturity.

Confession is easier than we might realize. Most of the ways that we sin, we are sinning against God, and even when our sin involves someone else, God is included because that person we wronged is special to God as well. At different times in history, people have believed that the way to prove they were sorry was to do some grand, painful, and/or extreme task. The idea that confession is difficult is true but it is easier than trying to prove ourselves to God. All God asks us is to

reject and confess (*a similar word would be “share”*) our sins and He will give us mercy. Rejecting involves repenting that we looked at in the last chapter, and now we are going to look deeper into confession.

Whether we understand how or not, confession opens up our hearts to God. Confession happens when we have realized we have sinned, and immediately following us realizing that we don't want the sin in our lives any more, we confess our weakness to God. Sin, especially if we have repeated this sin more than once, results in weakness in our lives. Sin opens the door for Satan to tempt us and lead us further away from God. Sin weakens our character and this makes us more vulnerable to sinning. Confession is us acknowledging to God that we need His help to change. We submit to Him because we are unable to change our character on our own.

True confession will always recognize specific sins. Whether the sin and confession is between an individual and God, or whether the sin and confession is a private matter between two people, or whether the sin and confession is a public matter that must be publicly addressed and confessed, all true confessions will be specific, clear, and direct when admitting to the sins that are being confessed.

Forgiveness is linked to confession, because after humbling ourselves and submitting to those we have done wrong, we are then able to ask for forgiveness.

Forgiveness is an interesting concept because it is as much a financial term as it is a relational one. Looking at the financial side of forgiveness can help us understand some of the emotional and relational implications behind this idea.

Forgiveness, when money is involved, can only happen when one party is in debt to another. Either someone has borrowed money from another person, or someone has caused monetary harm to someone else. Forgiveness, when money is involved, releases the individual from the debt. Forgiving in these situations is similar to saying, “I will accept the harm, or penalties, that this situation has caused, and I will release you from having to repay me for the damages.”

Forgiveness in relationships works in a similar way. When we forgive others, we release them from the debt that we feel they owe us. In this way, the forgiver is able to emotionally move past the event and live their life without having the weight of this situation or obligation hanging on their mind and life. Forgiveness is the only way to move forward in life, especially in situations where the debt is impossible to repay, such as with lost time, lost relationships, or lost experiences. Even in situations when all you would want is a simple apology, the lack of

forgiveness will keep you from moving forward—not to mention that all the apologizing in the world will never repay the emotional debt that is accumulating with interest in your mind. Forgiveness is the only way to move forward in your emotional and spiritual life.

True confession and asking for forgiveness must happen after genuine repentance because repentance is realizing and turning away from the sin that caused the division in the first place. If someone hasn't made a commitment or taken any steps to turn away from what caused the separation or disagreement, then the confession doesn't mean much. Confessing in this manner is admitting that they have done something wrong, but in reality, there is no regret and nothing to say that they won't do the action again. God will not accept a confession that does not also have genuine repentance (*identified by a turning away from the sin*) included with it.

Because of all these things, both confession and forgiveness have more to do with the giver than with the receiver. Confession and asking for forgiveness are statements and requests from the givers perspective, and whether or not the receiver decides to forgive the giver, the confession and humbling that the giver displays when asking for forgiveness is the key to moving forward.

Also, because the nature of repentance is personal, but the natures of confession and forgiveness are relational, and originating from one party in a relationship, both confessing and forgiving do not mean that one should place themselves back into relationship with the other parties involved.

This is because confession and forgiveness are part of an event, whereas repentance involves a commitment and time to display the change. True confession and genuine repentance have at their core accepting the responsibility for choosing to do or say something wrong—a sin. If a confession includes avoiding responsibility, then God did not inspire the confession and God cannot accept it.

Similar to confession and forgiveness being an event and personal, repentance also begins as a personal event. For example, suppose a friend and I had a major disagreement over some lifestyle choice. The first thing I should do is realize and admit that I am wrong because I was trying to change my friend against his own will. I still may think that his choice is wrong, but I can only share my opinion and he has to decide whether or not he will listen to me. I confess to my friend that I acted wrongly towards him in the way that I did. I tried to change him when it ultimately is not my decision to make, and I ask him for forgiveness. My

friend has two options: forgive me, or don't forgive me. Either way, even if my friend forgives me, my friend has not admitted that his choice was wrong, and he has not committed to changing.

The goal in this situation is not to change my friend—because that is what got me into this problem—or even to let my friend know my disapproval—because my friend already knows this. Instead, for our relationship to move forward or for us to become friends again, I must humble myself and confess where I failed to my friend. This needs to happen with repentance, because if I turn around and continue to try to change my friend, then my confession didn't mean much. The forgiveness that I ask for is me admitting I was wrong to try to change him and there is no way that I can repay him for the emotional hurt that it caused. If he chooses to forgive me, then he is accepting the fact that the past hurt cannot be repaid, and he is releasing me from any obligation to repay the damage from the past hurt.

Being in, or keeping, a relationship with someone who is making bad lifestyle choices is not necessary, and the closer this person is to you, the more likely it will be that their choices that you don't agree with will affect your life. If there is no way to reconcile the differences, then repentance, confession, and forgiveness don't require a restored relationship at the end. This is ok. Some relationships are simply bad for both sides, and we are rarely able to see this clearly while we are in one. Situations where abuse is involved cannot usually be reconciled, but both parties need to understand the need for forgiveness, confession, and repentance, even if all three of these things happen individually.

Forgiveness with God also has the debt element tied to it. When we sin, whether it happened in the past or whether we are in the moment, the sin cuts our connection to God. Even though the sin might seem insignificant or irrelevant, we have already learned that no sin is small in God's eyes. When our connection and relationship with God is broken, trust is lost. God, the ruler of the universe, requires obedience, and breaking the laws that He has put in place for everyone's benefit has consequences—He gave us life, and the consequence is that we don't get to keep our life.

However, the debt that we incur when we disobey is something we can never repay. Once we have fallen, history with this action becomes etched in our permanent record. This presents a unique problem for a God who also loves us and who wants a close loving relationship with us. The first thing He has done was delay the punishment we deserve. The second thing He did was take the penalty upon Himself—another way of saying He forgave us. He was *(and still*

is) able to forgive our sins, and still remain just, because He sent Jesus—who is part of Himself—to die in our place, and Jesus paid for our sins. We learn this by reading the Bible in the book of Romans where it says,

“For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard. Yet God, with undeserved kindness, declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when He freed us from the penalty for our sins. For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed His life, shedding His blood. This sacrifice shows that God was being fair when He held back and did not punish those who sinned in times past, for He was looking ahead and including them in what He would do in this present time. God did this to demonstrate His righteousness, for He Himself is fair and just, and He declares sinners to be right in His sight when they believe in Jesus.” (*Romans 3:23–26*).

Repentance. Confession. Forgiveness. All three of these things are necessary for relationships to survive and grow. All three are hard and become harder if left undone. All three are essential in order to restore our relationship with God.

As we have discussed confession and forgiveness, is there anything that you are being impressed to confess to God? Is there anything in your life that you know is coming between you and God? Currently, God is leaving these distractions and sins unpunished with the desire that you turn and place your hope and trust in Jesus. He might leave these sins unpunished for a long time, but life isn’t guaranteed.

This isn’t a guilt trip. This is an observation from a true friend. I want to see you after this world has ended, and because of this, I want to be straight with you. Our journey together is beginning, and I want to help you last for the long-term, and the only way to survive past this life is to turn to and trust in Jesus.

God has shown us a way to be made right with Him without keeping the requirements of the law. We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ, and this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are. Can we boast, then, that we have done anything to be accepted by God? No, because our acquittal is not based on obeying the law. It is based on faith. (*Romans 3:21–22, 27*).



Confession

Will you continue on our journey together? What comes next has the ability to break our commitment and connection with God, or it can make our relationship with God stronger, more fulfilling, and leave us feeling truly empowered!

God has prompted me to confess these things to Him and ask for forgiveness:

Is there anything in your life that you know is coming between you and God?



Chapter 5:

Decision

*"You can make many plans, but the LORD's purpose will prevail."
(Proverbs 19:21).*

So far, we've talked about God, about sin, and about repenting, confessing, and asking for forgiveness from sin. Now we turn to one of the most challenging long-term problems that we face when making the decision and commitment to walk with God, and this problem is our freedom of choice.

Now I know that none of us would ever want to give up this freedom; however, this freedom also gives us the ability to be lazy, the option to choose not to act in our best interests, and the freedom to reject the truth. We are free to become hardheaded in our own opinions, we are free to waste our potential on unfulfilling, unrewarding activities, and we are free to reject reality. We have the freedom to limit ourselves by believing that God is not personal, that we are here by chance, and that what I am writing is self-help nonsense. We really do have the freedom to reject God, convince ourselves that He doesn't exist, and try to live as fulfilling as possible without His involvement.

The problem is that the freedom we have been given was intended to be the most empowering gift we could have, in order to allow for the most personal relationship possible, with a God who loved us enough to create us unique and special. Sin changed all of that, and now the sin-tainted freedom we have will always drift us further and further away from God, further into closed-minded thinking, further away from truth and empowerment, and further into the elaborate lies of Satan. Most people can look at society today and see things breaking down in the area of spirituality, and at the root of the problem is our God-given freedom of choice that is directed and influenced by our sin-filled hearts.

While we know that our freedom of choice is a cause of the problem, we also know that we cannot control this aspect of our society. No amount of laws, rules, regulations, or external forces can force someone to behave properly—especially

if they simply decide that they don't want to obey. As an example, we can look at the posted speed limits that are designed to keep us safe, and if we are late for a meeting, we may choose to disregard the rules and risk the higher possibility of a crash (*resulting in someone—maybe even ourselves—being hurt or killed*) over the embarrassment of walking in late after the meeting has started.

Our freedom of choice is one of the thorns in most society's sides, but what it offers is the chance for us to take personal responsibility. Our freedom of choice offers us the creativity to imagine and make better lives for others and ourselves. Our freedom of choice gives us the ability to love others, and be in healthy friendships, relationships, and marriages.

Choice and freedom has the potential to cause the greatest amount of trouble for us; but it can also be our greatest tool for reaching fulfillment and satisfaction in our lives. The way we begin to use our freedom of choice responsibility is by turning to God and asking for His guidance. God is never going to force Himself onto us, but He offers us guidance and suggestions on how we should live. Turning to God and submitting to His plan for our lives is the only way we can become truly fulfilled and completely satisfied with life. Only with God are we able to see and recognize sin and avoid the traps that Satan sets to keep us from experiencing the life God wants us to have. God's desire is to free us and heal us from sin, but since we are holistic, the change requires a complete transformation of our will, our mind, and our hearts.

One of the greatest deceptions Satan has pulled over many people is that God demands our faith without any proof or reason. This lie says we must believe the Bible, tradition, thoughts and theories that wiser people tell us without looking logically and rationally at the facts. God is interested in dialog, relationship, and two-way connection. He will not accept honor or respect that we do not willingly, freely, and intelligently give. Relationships, respect, and love cannot be forced. God's desire is for us to experience His love and the joy that is possible because of the freedom of choice He has given us.

God's ideal for us is that we reach the highest level of growth possible. With our freedom of choice, and a sound mind, He places endless opportunities that we can grasp. He invites us to humble ourselves to His plan so that He can work and transform our lives, but He leaves the final decision—the choice—up to us. We can choose Jesus, and allow Him to work in our mind and heart, or we can choose anything else, which results in us staying in sin and never reaching our God given potential.

What makes this decision even more extreme is that we must choose to put Jesus first in our lives and give up everything that would separate us from Him. If we choose Jesus, but place Him down on the list, perhaps after our career, after our time, or after our money issues, then we really haven't chosen Jesus. Jesus wants to work in us, and the life-transformation that He offers will affect our careers, our time, our money, our relationships, and our decisions. If we are holding on to anything stronger than Jesus, He will be unable to transform our lives and we will miss out on most of the blessings He has to offer.

One of the hardest temptations we face today is living a life of abundance, and one of the biggest lies is that we are not living a life of abundance. At the root of this deception is a love of money and status. It has been proven in several studies that becoming rich is a moving target, and the richer one gets, the richer they feel they need to become in order to have financial security. At the root of this temptation and the life of abundance in many people is the issue of greed and jealousy. Living a life of abundance plants the ideas that we need more, and when we see others who have more, we take that as a blow to our own self-worth, because we begin to focus on what we do not have. Loving money and dreaming of fame are the golden chains that keep many people—including many Christians—trapped to Satan.

The opposite side of the trap desires a life that is free from responsibilities and decisions. One idea people can have when dreaming of a life like this is the goal of becoming so wealthy/famous/successful that they can then rest on their past victories until they die. The biggest problem though, aside from understanding that money/fame/success is never enough to accomplish this goal, is that this plan leads to an empty life, shallow relationships, and unfulfilled dreams. Continuing further down this path will eventually lead to depression, and it could progress further downhill.

In order to be committed to God, we must put Jesus first in our lives and let go of everything that isn't leading us to Him or supporting us in our decision.

Some people—and many Christians have fallen into this trap—believe and say they are obedient to God while they rely on their own willpower to obey His laws. These people say they are submitting to God, while their actions show that they are determined to change their lives on their own—as a way of proving themselves to be worthy of being saved. Jesus' love does not fill their hearts. Instead, they are more interested in the checklist of right behavior and wrong action that they believe is required to gain admission into Heaven. This style of religion is worthless.

When Jesus is working on our lives, and we are walking with Him, He fills us with His love and His significance. Looking to our Creator for our significance is the only place we should look, because God created us, and therefore He has a purpose for us being alive. The longer we walk with Jesus, the more our lives will reflect His love and the more we will be inspired to act. One key way that we can see and identify this transformation is by watching what we do with God's love. If we are focused on simply doing the minimum things necessary, or if we are tightfisted with our time, money, or energy, then we haven't been transformed by God's love. The mark of transformation is reflecting Jesus, who gave disproportionately to help others. When our lives reflect Jesus' love, we will intensely focus our lives, time, and decision on being with Jesus and working with Jesus in a way that reflects Jesus' love. Claiming to follow Jesus without this deep love and passion to know Him is unattractive formality, meaningless tradition, and mediocre religion. What we never want is a mediocre religion.

"But wait, Cam," you may be saying or thinking. "This isn't practical. I simply don't have the time, energy, or willpower to do this. I am not sure if this is even for me." These thoughts and objections that you may be thinking stem from one key idea: The cost of following Jesus is too high; it is too difficult; and it cannot be done.

Instead of focusing on the reasons this doesn't work or why we can't follow through with this, we should ask ourselves what Jesus gave up to be with us. "What did it cost Jesus to bridge the gap between Heaven and humanity?" In addition to giving up His life, Jesus gave up parts of His divine nature to become human. He chose to live a life where He was misunderstood, ridiculed, rejected, and ultimately killed in the cruelest way imaginable for the chance that we would choose to love Him back.

We live in a world where we are blessed with the true freedom of choice. We are able to decide for ourselves, at any moment, whether we want to accept the grace and forgiveness that Jesus offers. With this freedom, we cannot understand or comprehend how life would be without this choice. The reason Jesus came to this earth was to take the punishment that we deserved for rebelling against God. With all that Jesus faced for us, and because of us, will we still choose to believe the lie that we can attain eternal life on our own—either through our good actions or with sneaky logic?

However, the pride and sin in our lives push back with a deceptive, rebellious question: "Why should I humble myself before Jesus before I can have the guarantee that I am accepted by God?" This is a very tricky question, but by

looking at Jesus life, we are able to find the answer. Jesus lived a perfect life. This accomplishment means that He did not deserve death, but He was killed. The reason He even decided to come to earth to live life with us was to take our sins upon Himself. So, living a perfect life, He was able to die in our place and take the punishment we deserved because our lives have already been tainted by sin—from before we can even remember. Jesus chose to put us ahead of the perfect life He had in Heaven. He made the decision to place us first and to place the punishment we deserve upon Himself.

“Why should I trust Jesus before having a guarantee?” Perhaps, because He placed me first—ahead of His life in heaven, ahead of His divinity, ahead of His relationship with His Father. Even if Jesus wasn’t the way, the truth, and the way to eternal life, the thought of God choosing to become human to save humanity by dying is a powerful idea that is worth paying attention to.

So, if we are ready to give all of our lives over to Jesus, what does this really mean? How are we to do this? What do we give up?

Giving our lives to Jesus means allowing Him to take our sin-filled and polluted hearts and recreate them with new, clean hearts that are motivated by His infinite love. Giving our lives to Jesus means we place Him first, and if we are prompted with thoughts, ideas, or temptations that contradict how He lived His life in the Bible, then we decide to place living like Jesus ahead of the temptation. We choose to become generous with our time, energy, and money to help others grow and learn, and we are willing to walk with them as they are growing towards Him.

God does not require us to give up anything that He knows we would be better off keeping. He is interested in the quality of our lives being more exceptional than we do. One of the reasons Jesus performed miracles and preached for three years while He was on earth was because He came to model what a life with God can be like. He came to show us what a life dedicated to God could be like. His ideals for our lives are above anything we can ever imagine. We hurt ourselves the most when we think or believe that we know better than God, and instead of following God’s path, we choose to go our own way. Every path that God has not designed for us leads to depression, loneliness, and regrets.

God does not become happy when we make mistakes. God is not interested in seeing us hurting because we faced the consequences of our actions. God is not a harsh judge watching for the very moment that we mess up so He can punish us. Our heavenly Father is instead interested in us living the best possible life we can, and He does not close any door to us that leads to genuine joy and

lasting satisfaction for us. Following God's principles helps us ignore and reject everything that would cause misery and disappointment in our lives. By growing closer to Jesus, we are able to sense the traps Satan puts in our way to separate us from living with God, and we can experience God-inspired joy in our lives.

Jesus, our Redeemer, accepts us as we are, with all the areas we have failed, and with all the scars from our bad choices, but He is not interested in leaving us this way. His desire is not to just recreate a new heart in us, but to transform our entire lives to be full and satisfying. He longs to give us His peace and rest as rewards for following Him. The only things He insists on are the things we need to be truly happy, and disobedience to God will never lead to the same level of fulfillment, satisfaction, or happiness.

“OK, Cam, I think I am beginning to see I might want to try your way out now. So how do I surrender and dedicate myself to God? I see that I fall short, there are some nagging doubts in my head, and my life is full of habits I know God would not approve of.”

There are countless ways or reasons why we feel as though God cannot accept us. However, don't give up. This is where decisions and the freedom of choice are able to shine. Everything in our lives depends on the quality of our choices. While we cannot change our hearts and our lives on our own, and we cannot demand that God do His work within us, we can make decisions that will lead us in the direction of God. We can choose to avoid situations we know God would not approve of, and we can choose to engage in activities that lead us towards Him. We can make the decision to give Him our will, and by giving Him our will, we invite Him to begin working in our lives.

Starting with the decision to give our willpower over to God, we allow Him to transform our lives from the inside out and God will be able to transform our whole nature and character. Our thoughts will change and we will begin to see the world as God does.

Simply wanting to be better and wanting to be right with God are positive steps necessary for change, but if these thoughts don't progress into actions and/or decisions, they will end up being nothing. Many people are dreaming of a better walk with God, but they will be lost—even many people who call themselves Christian—if they never reach a point where they decide to and surrender their will to God. By delaying the choice to submit to Jesus, they risk missing out on eternity.



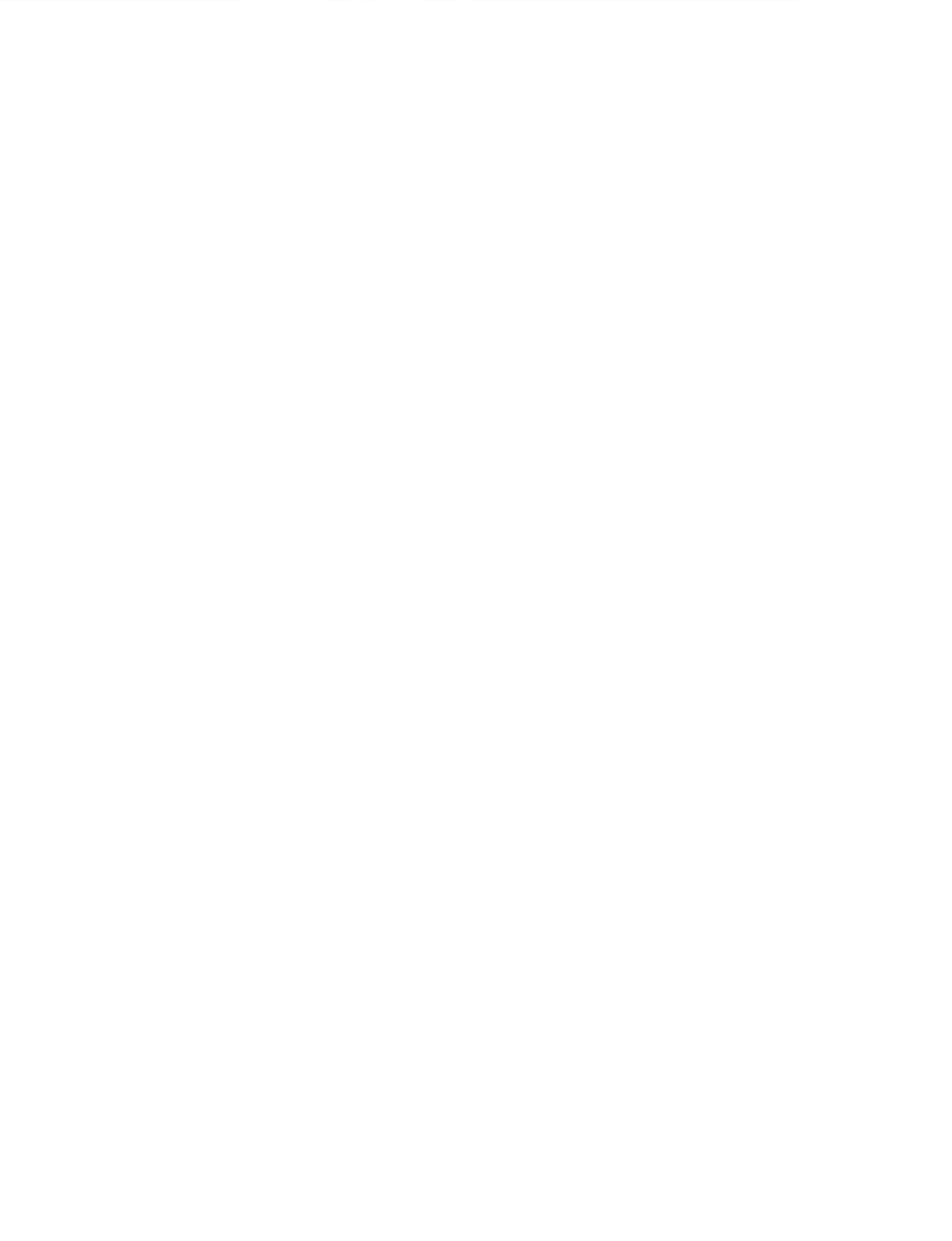
Decision

With our God-given freedom to make decisions, we can choose to yield our will to Christ, align ourselves with His Word, and partner with His heavenly power. With this decision, we can look to heaven for the strength to keep us safe, and through always surrendering to God's will, we will be empowered to live a new life—a life of faith.

What are some decisions that we can make to grow closer to God and allow Him to make changes in our lives?

Do we see anything in our lives right now that God might be prompting us to give up so that He can grow closer to us?

If you are ready to make a decision for Jesus, here are some lines you can use to write out a prayer of decision today!





Chapter 6:

Acceptance

*“So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus.”
(Romans 8:1).*

Of the topics that we have talked about so far, the idea of acceptance might just be the most difficult to *accept*. Leading up to this point, we have seen how we have fallen short, how sin has infected our lives, and how we need Jesus to be our Savior. In this chapter, we will look at how we can actually be accepted and made right with God. We have the burning desire for God to forgive us and to set us free from sin’s power. We need peace, assurance, and to accept that God accepts us.

We cannot buy this peace, study our way into understanding this peace, or create this peace within ourselves. However, God offers this peace to us as a “no-strings-attached” gift. God has promised us that, “Though your sins are like scarlet, I will make them as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, I will make them as white as wool.” (*Isaiah 1:18*).

Once we have confessed that we have sinned, and we have resolved to give our lives over to God, we are able to go to Him, ask that He wash away our sins, and give us a new heart. We don’t need to doubt God because we have been learning that He wants the best for us. The passage above tells us that God is not interested in leaving us in our sin. We also can read His promise where He says, “I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart.” (*Ezekiel 36:26*). Jesus also demonstrated this when He lived here on earth.

Jesus healed thousands of people while He traveled around teaching and preaching. The people who were healed both wanted healing and they had faith in Jesus’ healing power. Jesus helped stretch their thinking and helped many of them see new spiritual insights. One of the most audacious things Jesus inspired people to believe about Him is that He had the authority to forgive their sins—something only God can do. “So I will prove to you that the Son of Man has the

authority on earth to forgive sins.’ Then Jesus turned to the paralyzed man and said, ‘Stand up, pick up your mat, and go home!’” (*Matthew 9:6*). The story of this paralyzed man is amazing. Jesus heals this individual because of the faith of his friends. This man was disabled for years, we don’t know for how long, and Jesus gives him a new chance at life in an instant.

Another fascinating miracle account is in John 5. A man has been paralyzed for 38 years and it appears as though he has lost hope. First Jesus asks the man if he really wants to be healed. On receiving the man’s answer that he has no one to help him, Jesus tells this man (*like the other man*) to pick up his mat and walk. This is before any act of healing takes place. In both cases, Jesus gives each of them a choice: Believe Jesus and act, or demand proof that Jesus has healed them before trying on their own. In each case, the men believe, push themselves to act and the healing that Jesus promised is revealed.

In our own lives, we face the same problem. We cannot fix or resolve our past sins and we cannot change our hearts enough to make ourselves acceptable on our own before God. However, God has promised to do all of this through Jesus. Do you believe this promise? Have you confessed your sins and dedicated yourself to God? Do you decide to serve Him? When we have these three things (*belief, repentance with confession, and a commitment to serve God*), we are able to step out in faith and know that God will follow through on His side of the promises. When we believe the promise, specifically when we believe we are forgiven and made clean before God, God then supplies the fact. God heals us, just as Jesus gave the paralyzed men the power to walk when they believed they were healed. When we believe as these men did, God will follow through on His promise.

We shouldn’t wait to *feel* forgiven or healed. Instead, we should tell ourselves, “I believe this and it is true, not because I actually feel it, but because this is what God has promised me.” Is this lying to ourselves? Not if we believe the words of Jesus. He says, “I tell you, you can pray for anything, and if you believe that you’ve received it, it will be yours.” (*Mark 11:24*). Two deceptions can come from not understanding this promise. The first deception is that we can pray for something that is counter to God’s will. It is possible that we can push our willpower and succeed in the request we prayed, but nothing counter to God’s will can be guaranteed. The second deception comes from reading this promise out of context, because verse 25 says that we must first forgive anyone who we have a grudge against so that God will forgive our sins. If we do not have a forgiving heart towards others, then our prayers for forgiveness won’t be heard.

However, we know that God wants to purify us from sin, to adopt us into His family, and to empower us to live holy lives. Knowing how Jesus healed the sick, we can see how He cleanses and purifies us from the sin in our life. By asking for forgiveness, and by having a forgiving heart towards others, we do ourselves no good by doubting God's promises. We have the benefit of going to Jesus to be purified, and when Jesus cleanses us, we can stand before the standard of the law without any guilt, shame, or fear.

Jesus paid a steep price for us, and we shouldn't take the gift He offers us lightly. Through the act of believing in God and claiming Jesus' cleansing power in our lives, and knowing that the Holy Spirit has purified our hearts, we are now reborn as a child in the family of God, and He loves us as much as He loves His own Son.

Now that you have dedicated yourself to Jesus, do not change your mind. Do not decide to leave Him behind, but instead, each day pray and remind yourself that, "I am part of God's Family, I have given myself to Him, and I choose to remain His through His power. Please continue to give me Your Spirit and keep me safe."

"Wait a minute, Cam. Are you trying to tell me that I am instantly forgiven?"

Yes.

Some people have the belief that God requires a probationary period where sinners must prove they are committed to God by showing they have changed their lives. They believe this promise is too good to be true, and if it is, "too good to be true," it cannot be correct. They don't believe that someone can simply claim God's blessing for themselves.

What these people don't realize about this belief this is that they must have the blessing and the grace of God to even resist temptation and sin. By believing they must prove themselves to God before He will accept them means that they will never be able to be made right with God, because all their good actions are still tainted by sin.

The invitation is open for anyone and everyone (*including you and I*) to come to God with all our weakness, foolishness, and sinfulness, and humbly bow at His feet with repentance in our heart. It is enough for us to feel sorry and to be willing to change. It is enough for some to be simply willing to look to Jesus with humility in their lives. God's passion is to forgive us and cleanse us from our sin, to bring healing into our lives, and to purify us from everything that pollutes our lives.

Another group of people struggle with the idea of acceptance. This group's obstacle is that they don't believe Jesus is able or willing to forgive them personally. They are deceived because they can see these great promises, and who gave them, but they don't believe these promises are true for themselves personally. By believing this, they are not taking God at His word. For everyone who understands their need for Jesus, and the steps we have been talking about, He freely invites us to accept His gift of forgiveness for every individual sin—no matter how significant or trivial we feel our sins are.

If you are feeling any doubt in your heart, or if you feel like you have done something that makes you unacceptable to God, silence the doubt in your mind, because if you decide today, right now to repent and turn away from your sins, and ask God for forgiveness, then these promises are meant for you.

No one is too sinful that Jesus can no longer forgive them, *and you are included in this group*. No one is too sinful that they cannot find strength, purity, and a right standing with God through Jesus, who gave His life on a cross to die for them, and you are included in this group. God longs to help you take off your sin-stained clothes that represent your sin-tainted characters, and replace them with new clothes that reflect Christ's character. With this new life and character, we may truly live and not die.

Satan is ready to steal away the promises of God. He wants to take away any idea in our mind that we are savable; he wants to steal away our hope—but we must not let him do this. Don't listen to the temptation that we are too lost in our sins to be saved and, instead, say something like, "Jesus has died so that I can live. He loves me but I have abused His love and wasted His blessings. Instead of believing I am too far-gone, I will choose to come to You, Father, and say: 'I have sinned against both heaven and You, and I am no longer worthy of being called Your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.'" (*Luke 15:18-19*). Reading further in the illustration, we see how the father (*representing God the Father*) receives this repentant heart: "Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him . . . his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.'" (*Luke 15:20, 22-24*). However, even this illustration in Luke falls short of expressing just how deeply God loves us.



Acceptance

With promises all throughout the Bible, where is there any room for doubt? With all we have seen and looked at, is it even still possible in your mind that God could reject someone who has sinned and who longs to return to Him and turn away from the sin that separated them? If you still feel this, then choose to silence those thoughts and ignore them when you are tempted to think them again. Nothing can hurt our hearts and minds more than to think of God as being someone who would reject someone who wishes to return to Him. God hates sin, but He loves the sinner, and He gave us Jesus, who was part of Himself, so that everyone who wants to can accept the invitation of salvation—being saved from our sins and being given a new life, a new heart, and a new home awaiting us in Heaven.

Jesus died to make it possible for us to be saved from our sin. Pray today and thank God for the gift of His Son and pray that He did not die for you for nothing. The Holy Spirit invites you today: Come with your whole heart to Jesus, and you may claim His promise, His blessing, and truly know you have God's acceptance.





Chapter 7:

Follow

“Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If any of you wants to be My follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow Me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for My sake, you will save it.” (Matthew 16:24–25).

Up to this point, we have been talking about things we need to learn, actions we must take, decisions we must make, and changes to our character we must accept. This list is a little simplified, but we have learned that God loves us personally, that we need Jesus to save us from sin, and that we must accept Jesus into our lives by repenting and asking for forgiveness for our sins, and then making the decision to live a new life with Jesus. For some people, we see this process clearly happen over a definite period in time; for others, this is a gradual and less obvious process. God works differently in each of us, and the lack of a clear conversion experience does not mean that someone has not experienced conversion.

However, now we move to the journey process we alluded to when talking about repenting. We will call this process “following Jesus”, or “being His disciples”. As we grow closer to Jesus, and as we make decisions that help lead us to Jesus, changes will begin to happen in our lives. As we follow Jesus’ footsteps and let Him work in our lives, He will recreate our hearts through the Holy Spirit, and our lives will begin to change as we begin to reflect His life and character.

The challenge with seeing the Holy Spirit is that we cannot see the Holy Spirit. The best way to describe the Holy Spirit is like a spiritual wind. Like the wind that moves the clouds and flows through the trees, the Holy Spirit also moves. We cannot see the wind; however, we can continually see the effects of the wind.

While we are unable to see the Holy Spirit, we can see the effects of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in the lives of those around us when we see life change happen. When the Holy Spirit has renewed our hearts, our lives will show it. Others will notice the changes in our character, our habits, our goals, our

motivation, and our focus. They will remember how we lived before and they will remember how different it was. The truly transformed heart will live a life that is pleasing to God whether or not anyone else is around.

Another challenge with looking at a life that is following Christ's example is that it is possible for someone to live a life filled with good behavior without Jesus and the Holy Spirit renewing their heart. The desire for fame and other's approval can push some to live honestly and with integrity. Self-confidence and willpower can lead some people to avoid the appearance of evil in their lives, and a selfish heart can perform generous actions. How then can we tell if we, or someone we trust, are living life with Jesus' selflessness or the world's selfishness?

It is more challenging to identify this in others, but we can look at ourselves with greater accuracy. To evaluate our lives, we must first look at who has our heart. We must look at where our thoughts are coming from. We must look at where we have focused our lives. When we have a life that is on Christ's selfless side, we view everything we do as being dedicated to Him. We see a connection between our work and our worship, and we desire to become like Him and show His character to the world. We look to Him, and what He has revealed to us, to recognize our calling, and we make conscious decisions each day to live a life that brings honor to His name.

Another set of distinctions that our lives have the Holy Spirit working in them is that our lives will display a set of characteristics called "the fruits of the Spirit". These "fruits" are "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." (*Galatians 5:22-23*). With these fruits in our lives, we are saying we no longer act as we used to, but instead, we are using God's strength, through our faith and trust in Jesus, to follow His plan for our lives and, as a result, we will reflect His character to others. When no one else is around, we are still motivated to be as pure as when others are present because we are always living in the presence of God.

Experiencing a "U-turn" in motivation is another characteristic of a selfless heart. By performing a "U-turn" in our lives, we realize that many of the things we use to love doing we now hate, and things we would never think about doing are things that we love to do. Here are some examples of the U-turn in action. Individuals who were proud and forceful before become humble and gentle. People who were conceited and arrogant before become modest and humble. Those who were alcoholics become sober, and the immoral become pure. With truly transformed lives because the power of God is working in us, we leave behind all ineffective habits and traditions that we picked up from this world.

When we repent and turn to God, the evidence our actions are genuine is a transformed and reorganized life that is now aligned with God's will and character. If we fail as sinners, and then decide to recommit our lives back to God by turning away from our sins and humbly confessing how we still need Jesus, we can again claim God's promise of acceptance. By returning to Jesus, and accepting His gift of forgiveness and grace, we experience love again in our hearts.

Jesus' followers will display His character and love. Jesus' life shows us how to have true love for God, genuine passion for His glory, and a burning desire to follow God's will. Love filled and strengthened everything Jesus said and did. True love is only possible with God. Sin has damaged our hearts, and by holding our broken hearts close to us, we will only taint our efforts to love others.

There are two beliefs we must watch out for when we begin to understand how God's grace transforms our lives and covers our sins. The first one we have already talked about, and that is the belief that we look to our own abilities to strengthen us and bring us to a place where we feel we are acceptable to God. It is the idea we must become holy enough by what we do and by keeping the law. By attempting this, we are destined to fail, because without Jesus in our lives, the sin in our hearts and our own selfishness pollute everything we do. Realize that only Jesus' grace, through faith, is able to make us right with God.

The other belief we must be careful to avoid is the belief that Jesus has freed us from keeping the law of God; or in other words, since God's grace and Jesus' death have saved us, we can claim this salvation by faith and trust in Jesus, and what we do—our actions—are no longer important. This would be similar to a marriage where one spouse decides to sleep around with other people. This spouse is not interested in losing the marriage or getting a divorce, but their actions do not show commitment to their "other-half". Jesus may have saved us from the life we lived before, but if we decide to forget our commitment and make the decision to return to our old habits, we should not be deceived with the theological idea that we still are saved by grace. While nothing can steal us out of God's protective hand, countless temptations will inspire and lure us into choosing to leave God's path of life.

Obedience to God is not simply an outward show of actions, but it is serving others with a loving and transformed heart. God's law is an expression of His character, and it is the foundation of His kingdom. If God has changed our lives and our characters into being like His, wouldn't obedience to His law seem like an appropriate way of showing that our lives have been transformed? Obedience is the true sign of following Jesus. This is why we find passages in the Bible like,

“Loving God means keeping His commandments, and His commandments are not burdensome.” (1 John 5:3); and “If someone claims, ‘I know God,’ but doesn’t obey God’s commandments, that person is a liar and is not living in the truth.” (1 John 2:4). Instead of faith and grace freeing us from the law and from obedience, faith and grace are the only way we can ever hope to achieve obedience.

Don’t misunderstand me, because I can hear some of you saying I am now preaching a gospel based on what we can do or achieve—a gospel of works. People working hard trying to save themselves is one branch of mainstream religion. People believing that all they have to do is ‘believe’ with no change visible in their character is another branch of mainstream religion. Both fall short of the Bible’s teaching on this subject.

“Then, Cam, what do you mean? How are people saved if obedience and believing aren’t the answers?”

We are saved by grace. Grace is a free gift we receive when we accept Jesus into our lives, and by accepting Jesus into our lives, we then learn the need for obedience. Jesus cannot be in our lives if we are disobedient to God’s laws. “Jesus came to take away our sins, and there is no sin in Him. Anyone who continues to live in Him will not sin. But anyone who keeps on sinning does not know Him or understand who He is.” (1 John 3:5-6). This means that the test of whether we are following Jesus, and if God’s love is in our hearts, is by displaying through our feelings, our thoughts, our goals, and our actions an alignment with God’s will for our lives—and part of God’s will is obedience to the foundation of His character. “Don’t let anyone deceive you about this: When people do what is right, it shows that they are righteous, even as Christ is righteous.” (1 John 3:7). Righteousness means following the standard of God’s holy law—as He expressed it in the ten promise-commandments He spoke on Mount Sinai.

Some of the mainstream Christian theology teaches that the freedom Jesus promises us is freedom from obedience to God. The problem with this is the same problem every other worldview faces. If there is no standard, then there is no way to determine what is right and wrong. If we look through history, societies and cultures have slowly shifted what is acceptable. In ancient times, some cultures sacrificed animals or even children to appease the gods. We might think they were crazy, but they were completely morally convinced they were doing what was necessary. Other periods of civilization were plagued with greed, sexual immorality, and slavery. We can look condescendingly at those times and say they were completely wrong, but they were convinced in their mind and heart they were completely right. The mainstream views that say we are free to do what our

heart tells us is flawed because even we change our minds and our thinking as we grow. Most people don't feel the same way they did about certain issues when compared to their teenage selves.

Instead, the worldview we are looking at says that the freedom Jesus gave us is the freedom to be able to obey God's law. It acknowledges and agrees that the Bible says, "God saved you by His grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God." (*Ephesians 2:8*), but it also acknowledges that the Bible says, "Faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless." (*James 2:17*). We also read, "We can be sure that we know Him if we obey His commandments. If someone claims, 'I know God,' but doesn't obey God's commandments, that person is a liar and is not living in the truth. But those who obey God's word truly show how completely they love Him. That is how we know we are living in Him. Those who say they live in God should live their lives as Jesus did." (*1 John 2:3-6*).

Jesus dying on the cross never changed the conditions that were required for receiving eternal life. The conditions were and will always be perfect obedience to God's laws, both the action and the intent, both the literal and the spiritual sides. If God gave us eternal life on any condition less than this, the whole universe would slowly degrade into sin and heaven would no longer be a place filled with joy and satisfaction.

Everything we try to do without Jesus in our lives to save ourselves from sin leads to death. We established our need for Jesus in the second chapter. The only place we can hope to go is to Jesus and we must put our faith and trust in Him in order to receive the gift of eternal life.

Let's take a minute and clarify something that causes many people confusion. We hear well-meaning Christians talking about the belief that all we need is faith Jesus lived on this earth, or the faith Jesus died and rose again, and by believing these things, we are guaranteed the gift of eternal life. It is true that we need faith in Jesus, and there is overwhelming evidence that Jesus died and rose again, but we must take the idea of "faith" and "belief" further than most people think.

The Bible, as well as our own logical minds, can tell us that God's enemy, Satan, would be well aware that Jesus lived, breathed, died, and was raised to life. Faith in facts and belief that events happened *is* a step from zero into a light form of belief, but we read that even Satan and his angels believe Jesus was God, and that He lived, died, and was raised back to life. They are well aware of this as a fact—but they will not be saved because they have rejected Jesus and God's rule.

The worldview we are looking at, the one where God loves us to the point that He came to die to save us and show us how much He loves us, tells us that genuine belief and faith in Jesus is when we place our weight onto Jesus and His sacrifice for our sins. Solid faith in Jesus means that if Jesus was not who He said He was, then we're all lost. We have no Plan B because Jesus is everything to us. If Jesus goes, our whole belief-system remains as an empty shell.

When we not only believe in God's Word, but also submit our will to Him, surrender our hearts to Him, and focus our attention and love on Him, we now have powerful, solid faith—the type of faith that obeys, cleans out, and renews our lives. Through this holistic faith, God is able to renew our hearts into His image. Hearts that have not been renewed cannot obey God's laws or understand the law's role in life.

Some people who are with us on this journey know that God loves them—that Jesus loves them—and that He has forgiven them, and they want to be and feel more like children of God. However, they also realize sin has tainted their characters, their lives are a mess, and they are doubtful that the Holy Spirit has renewed their hearts. If you feel this way while reading this, don't give up! Don't give up on God. Even when we are facing the results of our faults and mistakes, and when we are tempted to feel discouraged, we can still bring these problems to Jesus. Even if our enemy has pushed us into a corner, we know God has not rejected or given up on us. Right now, Jesus is sitting next to God and He is pleading our case, which may sound odd, because we also know God loves us passionately too. God wants to restore us to Himself—to a place where we reflect His purity and holiness, and when we submit ourselves to Him, He will finish the work He started and He will continue with the work until Jesus returns.

The longer we follow Jesus, and the closer we grow towards Him, the more flawed our lives will look like when compared to His perfection. However, we will have significantly clearer vision, and we will know where we have fallen short. The closer we are to Jesus, the life-giving restoring power He offers will draw us in, and Satan's tricks and deceptions will lose their power—we will be able to see through all of Satan's tricks and temptations.

We cannot place love for Jesus at the core of our heart and life if we don't fully understand how sinful our hearts really are. We can allow God's grace to transform our lives to a degree and we can admire His character, but if we never realize our own failings and how we don't measure up, and this realization doesn't lead us to surrender ourselves to Jesus, this itself is evidence that we have not really seen the true beauty and perfection of Christ.





Chapter 8:

Growth

*"It is God's will that your honorable lives should silence those ignorant people who make foolish accusations against you. For you are free, yet you are God's slaves, so don't use your freedom as an excuse to do evil."
(1 Peter 2:15–16).*

We have been together on this journey, and now we come to the concept of growth, specifically, growing into being like Jesus. I'm not sure how fast you have digested all the information up to this point, but if you have spent even a small amount of time following each section and thinking about how you can apply the principles into your life, then I am positive that growth has happened in your life.

When we talk about growth, there are two ways we can categorize the growth we experience. The first type of growth we will call natural growth, because we experience it through such things as our bodies aging, increased life experience, more time spent in relationships, etc. The second type of growth is focused, planned, and on purpose. We will call this type intentional growth, and this comes as the result of a decision we make to study or learn something new.

When we talk about spiritual growth, most people think it is only intentional growth, while some people believe it is only natural, similar to how we talked in the last section about how we don't see the Holy Spirit. However, we instead take an 'and' approach. Growing with Jesus involves both a decision and it involves time spent allowing natural growth in our spiritual lives to take place.

In many cases, we can look at nature to help us understand how we grow spiritually. Take the example of a seed. Sometimes someone intentionally plants it, while at other times the seed simply falls randomly to the place where it will grow. In the case where someone has planted the seed, oftentimes they will have prepared the ground, and spent time getting the environment ready for the seed. For the seed that falls randomly, there is no guarantee what the ground conditions will be like or if it can even grow. If the seed falls randomly, the chances that it will grow are low because the conditions are unknown. Sure, a parent plant

nearby survived, but perhaps the seed needs more space to thrive than where it initially landed. However, for intentionally planted seed, the chances that it will grow and thrive are high, because there was forethought involved.

However, after the two seeds reach the ground and find their resting place, growth happens naturally. The seed that fell randomly has no guarantee what the conditions will be like, or if the conditions will suit proper growth. If this seed is able to grow, that is wonderful, but even if growth starts, the environment that it is in has a strong influence on how large it will get. Odds are strong that the randomly planted seed won't make a fully developed plant.

The intentionally planted seed has the best start. It began with a decision, and it will grow. However, don't mistake this point. Although a decision was made and the stage was set for the seed to thrive, the growth happens slowly, naturally, and it is not directly controllable. We can assist the environment and the circumstances to help the growth continue, but we cannot speed the growth up.

This is the same way with cats, dogs, and other animals (*whether they are pets or not*). The same is true for children. We cannot speed up the physical growth from aging, but we can choose to give good environments for the young to learn, grow, and thrive. Just as we cannot speed our physical growth, we cannot speed up our spiritual growth.

Spiritual growth can begin with a choice, but for it to grow and thrive, the role of our choice is used by making good decisions about what environments to place ourselves in. True spiritual growth only happens when we stay connected to Jesus, and we need to allow the natural growth process to take place. Impatience at our current speed, envy at others' growth or place in life, or just wishing for a better, faster, or easier road to growth, will not speed up or even aid the process. This is the journey, the road to spiritual growth, which we can choose to travel. However, our choice isn't how fast we travel, but what road we choose to travel on.

In our spiritual lives, many roads twist and turn, and ultimately, these roads lead to nowhere, but there is a spiritual path that leads to Jesus and to life. This "narrow road" does not look very popular, and on the front end, it doesn't appear to go to anywhere special or unique, but travel on it and the time spent on this path will lead to understanding and wisdom. Time spent on this path places you in situations where the Holy Spirit is more likely to work. Time spent on this path helps you make better decisions and choices that avoid the pitfalls many of the other roads experience. Time spent on this path leads up a mountain—and while some of the other roads start up the same mountain, all the other roads either

stop, fade away, or they change direction and leave the mountain that leads to Jesus. From the vantage point of life on this path, we are able to look out and see the different roads snaking around and we can see where they lead. The further up the mountain we travel on this path, the less likely we will want to ever turn back because we experience cleaner air, a clearer mind, and a deeper experience with God.

Just like the smartest science has yet to create the smallest piece of nature and, as humans, we are only able to reproduce human life, so we must look to God's Spirit to grow true spiritual life within us. Any efforts to grow our own spiritual life we could compare with trying to grow and produce oranges while planting apple trees.

God loves us and He has sent His Spirit to surround the earth with grace through the gift Jesus Christ offers. Remaining connected to Jesus is the way we are able to breathe His Spirit into our lives, and by breathing in God's Spirit, our spiritual lives grow stronger. Similar to how flowers turn and point to the sun, we should look to the Son of God, so that our characters will begin to reflect the character of Christ.

There are some people who say they take an "and" approach to their spiritual growth, but are really acting out a "but" approach. These people say they trust Jesus *and* know that He has forgiven their sins, *but* they act as though it is now up to them to move forward. Looking at the road and path analogy, this idea is similar to someone saying that Jesus showed them the path, but now He has left it up to them to walk along it, and it is up to them to climb the mountain. This is a deception because it stems from the idea that God created life in the past, and God made the way for salvation to happen in the past, but that now that "His work is done", we are left on our own in the present—and it is up to us what we will do with this knowledge. This road might look like the right path near the beginning, but it becomes more traveled upon the further one walks on it, and while it may start up the right mountain, it turns, and leads instead to the edge of a cliff. This idea is doomed to failure because Jesus Himself said, "apart from Me you can do nothing." (*John 15:5*).

Our spiritual growth, our happiness, and our value all depend on our connection with Jesus. It is only when we remain connected with Him and intentionally make time to strengthen our relationship with Him that we end up growing spiritually.

“OK, Cam,” you might say, “I understand, but how do I actually stay connected with Jesus?”

The way to stay connected with Jesus is to continue doing the things that helped you connect with Him initially. The way we began the journey is by deciding to and placing our faith and trust in Jesus. We continue to grow with Him by daily making the decision to place our trust in Him. We begin by giving ourselves to Him so that He can take our hearts, our will, and our lives and use them to be of service to others. Secondly, we take all of Jesus into our life, allowing Him to be everything to us, allowing Him to fill our minds and our hearts, and depending on Him to be our strength, depending on Him to change our heart, and depending on Him to help us obey in every situation we face.

As we begin each day, we can start by dedicating our lives to God. We could pray a prayer such as, “Heavenly Father, I dedicate my life to You today. Here are all of my plans, my goals, and my dreams; I lay them here at Your feet. Use me today to accomplish Your goals, and in everything I do today, lead me to bring glory to Your name.” We can pray this prayer of dedication each morning—for each day. By submitting our lives and our plans to God each day, we will begin to reflect Jesus’ life in our lives.

We also grow into loving Jesus more when we read about His life. We learn how He loved others while being clear about the line of sin. We can learn how He placed others first in His life, and this was second only to time in prayer and continual dedication to God the Father. We learn how He pushed people to think, trust, and want more out of life than they originally thought they could. We see and understand Jesus’ character when faced with opposition, and we learn how He never gave into the idea that sin was OK under any circumstance, while still being full of forgiveness when people were hurting. By spending time reading about Jesus, directly from the Bible, we allow the Holy Spirit access to our hearts and we invite Him to teach us about God.

Living with Jesus in our lives might look like a boring life to someone who doesn’t understand it; however, it is never boring. A better word that could describe it is “restful”, or “emotionally peaceful”. Others, whose lives do not have this trust and peace, cannot understand the people who do. We do have our share of difficulties, and our good days and our bad days; however, we do not have the same extremes that others face. We place our hope, trust, and faith in Jesus. In the areas we are weak, we lean on His strength; in the areas we are ignorant, we lean on His

wisdom; and in the areas we lack follow-through, we rely on His never-ending power. It is by loving Him, modeling Him, depending completely on Him, that God's Spirit will transform us into Jesus' image.

When we focus on ourselves, we are not looking to Jesus, the source of strength and life. Because we have this weakness, it makes perfect sense that Satan would distract us in every way he can to keep us from looking to Jesus as our Savior. It is his goal to distract us with the pleasures of the world, the difficulty and hurts of life, the faults of others, or our own faults and imperfections, in order to prevent us from looking to building a relationship with Jesus. Don't be tricked by his schemes. Satan deceives many people who desire to live for God by tempting them to focus on their own faults and weaknesses. By focusing on their failures, these people are no longer looking to Jesus. Focusing on ourselves never ends positively. We should not entertain fears or doubts about whether Jesus has saved us. All these things turn our focus away from Jesus—the Source of our strength. Make a commitment to keep your heart and mind focused on Jesus and on trusting in Him. Become so focused on Him that you no longer are able to see yourself. By remaining humble and submitted to His will, we will be victorious through Him and through His love.

The biggest thing we must watch out for is our own freedom of choice. We have touched on this in earlier chapters, but it is worth repeating here for emphasis. When Jesus became human, He joined Himself with humanity with a connection of love that cannot be broken by any power except for the power of our own human choice—our own free will. Satan is constantly pressing distractions into our lives in an effort to pull our eyes off Jesus. This is the biggest temptation we must watch out for, because we must always be on the lookout, guard against, and pray that nothing may lure us into choosing another master, but we are always free to do this. We can guard ourselves from this temptation by keeping our eyes fixed on Christ, and trusting in Him to keep us safe. When we place our trust completely in Him, nothing can steal us out of His hands.

As we decide to continue to follow and grow with Jesus, we must remember that there is no shortage of ideas or opportunities to distract us from Jesus. In the next chapter, we will begin to look at some more practical steps for us to take while following Jesus and moving forward into a new life with Him.

However, as we conclude this section, let's take a few minutes and preplan at least three ways we can stay connected to Jesus. Let's commit to follow through with our decisions when challenges show up, and let's place Jesus back into being the first place in our lives if He has slipped from being at the top or if other things have crowded into first place with Him.

1. I can stay connected to Jesus by:

2. I can stay connected to Jesus by:

3. I can stay connected to Jesus by:



Chapter 9:

Calling

"So I saw that there is nothing better for people than to be happy in their work. That is why we are here!" (Ecclesiastes 3:22a).

We have made the decision to follow Jesus, and we are committed to continually placing ourselves in environments and activities that will allow God's Spirit to grow our spiritual lives. However, some people might wonder or ask what are we to do with this newfound freedom and empowerment? Where does our work fit in? What do we do with our careers? Where does the idea of following our calling fit with all of this?

The idea of work and worship are linked, not only in English (*both words start with the same three letters*), but also in other languages like Hebrew. In Hebrew, the same word covers both concepts. An equivalent English word for both describing honest work and genuine worship is the word 'service'. How well are we serving God? How well are we serving others?

If the idea of worship seems foreign to you, or perhaps, you understand it to be only singing songs to God, then worship and work are completely separate—unless you enjoy singing while you do other tasks. However, viewing work as something that is not connected to worship will never allow you to reach the ideal unity and focus in your life that we will describe as your "calling" or your 'life mission'.

Understanding that loving God leads us to love others, and the idea of service, is one of the foundational elements of our calling. When God's love fills our hearts, it will overflow and lead us to bless others by sharing it with them. This overflow can happen anywhere and everywhere, whether we are helping the less fortunate on the street, to whether we are helping the elite in society with a purchase. We can share this overflow of God's love in our hearts with others by understanding and viewing every interaction we have as an act of love for our communities, as an opportunity to represent God, and as an opportunity to serve God directly.

Jesus had an unequalled unity between His work and His worship. We can see this displayed in His life because He aimed all his interaction towards drawing everyone who would listen to a better understanding and knowledge of God. Even when Jesus spoke harshly towards the religious leaders while He was on earth, He was trying to help them realize they were missing the truth. Jesus died the death of a rebel, and this was the key purpose of His life on earth. While the Jewish leaders believed they were killing Jesus to save their way of life, they ultimately accomplished a way for themselves—and all of humanity—to be saved from sin. We can look at Jesus' life and, very regularly, we read that He was telling His followers He would be killed. It seems as though, they never understood or grasped what He meant. Jesus had an incredibly focused life and mission, and everything He did was to bring glory to God and help to others.

Another thing that focused Jesus' life was that He was passionate about freeing us from sin. He did not focus on building Himself a foundation so He could later 'retire', but instead, He focused on leaving the people He met in a better place in their lives than when they started. Nothing in Jesus' life or calling focused on Himself.

Jesus left us with the mission to tell others about Him. This is both a broad and huge challenge, and a very specific task. In our daily lives, how are we integrating the mission Jesus told us to do? If you are not a Christian, or even if you are, how do you see other Christians sharing the news about Jesus? Do you even see Christians serving others in Christ-like ways?

There are two groups of people who will have stayed with me this far. The first group are Christians who want more from their Christianity. To these people, I ask the questions, "How can you blend what you know about Jesus with the work you do each day?" and "Is Jesus glorified with how you act while working (*or how you perform your work*)?" If these questions return positive answers, then begin to see your work as a way you can worship God. Allow God's love to flow from your heart in how you help, serve, and care for those you interact with each day.

The second group are those who are not Christians. If you have made it this far into this book, you are diligently seeking if there is anything more to spirituality than what many of the popular self-help motivational speakers are claiming. I want to tell you there is, but it is not another program. It is Jesus, and I am sure you are already aware that helping you meet Jesus is the goal of this book. I am not interested in turning you into a mainstream "Christian", because most Christians don't understand how our lives are connected between the weekend and the weekday. We know in our hearts that our lives are holistic and we fail

when we try to “fake it until we make it”. The worldview we are looking at sees us as holistic beings, and we must unify our character and personality so we are the same people when we are at work, at home, on vacation, and traveling between the three. We know we can’t fake lasting success, and we are curious if we can learn from Jesus without being captured into becoming like the “Christians” we see around us or on TV. As part of this second group, I invite you to share what you have learned so far, but more importantly, begin to look at your work as a form of worship and/or service to God.

God has given everyone a part to play in His mission to save the world. We are to bless and help others by sharing with them the good news about Jesus. This is something we can do in every *job* we may take because every *job* available involves more than a one individual. *(In order to be given a task, there needs to be someone who is giving the task, so even if a job is primarily working alone, there is a second individual who is providing the work—not to mention someone who is benefitting from the work being done.)*

This is something we can do in all parts of life, because we are constantly meeting and interacting with people outside of our *day job*—including friends, family, colleagues, acquaintances, and potential friends. God could have given His angels the task of preaching and sharing about Jesus, but He loves us so much He wants to work together with us and allow us the joy, blessing, and spiritual growth that comes from unselfishly serving others and sharing about Jesus.

There is another benefit of working with Jesus, and this is that it grows us closer to Him. By working alongside Jesus, we begin to recognize and learn the value of personal growth, and we feel the need to study and learn more about Jesus. Through service, we grow closer to Jesus, and through study inspired by service, we grow even closer, which inspires more service that is selfless. These things working together continually spiral us upward and closer to Jesus. Opposition that we face will push us deeper into studying and sincere prayer to learn the truth, and these things with God’s Spirit in us will result in growth occurring in our lives. All these pieces are stepping-stones in the process of growing with Jesus, growing in knowledge and understanding, and blending our calling in life with His purpose for us being alive.

In order to grow spiritually, we must do what God has called us to do. We must use our abilities to pursue the passion to help others that He has placed in our hearts. Just as building muscle comes from exercise, spiritual growth comes from actively using our abilities in service to others. Some people, oftentimes Christians, attempt to live a Christ-like life by passively accepting God’s blessings

while doing nothing in return. They are living their spiritual lives by only eating and not exercising. Like what happens in the natural world, with our bodies, only eating without exercise always results in our bodies declining, weakening, and wasting away (*or they get really fat*). Someone who stops using his/her arms will eventually lose the ability to use them at all. In the same way, someone who does not exercise the talents, passions, abilities, and gifts that God has given to them will not only fail while trying to grow spiritually, they will also lose the growth they already achieved.

If all of Jesus' true followers were to wake up and act upon the calling Jesus has placed on their hearts, there would be no shortage of people sharing the good news about Jesus all over the world. There would be a flood of people crossing oceans in both directions talking about how Jesus has completely transformed and refocused their lives. There would also be waves of financial support as people who understood the importance of sharing the news about Jesus transform their finances. A Christ-focused team would spread across the world and share the great news about what Jesus did for all of us. This message carries the same weight of importance now as it always has, but Satan has done a masterful job of distracting and pacifying us about sharing Jesus.

There is a lie that says we have to leave the country, or at the very least our city, to share the news about Jesus with others. This is a lie because there are people in your neighborhood and on your street who need to hear about Jesus. There are also people visiting churches across the country that need extra encouragement and someone to walk with while learning more about Jesus.

Another lie many people believe is that you need to be an evangelist, a pastor, or a church-worker in order to be allowed to officially share the news about Jesus. I hope you begin to realize that this is not true. What most people forget is that Jesus spent more of His life working with wood in a carpenter's shop than He did preaching and healing people. For more than ten years, He worked and glorified God through what some might call boring and ordinary work. This means that janitors, factory workers, mechanics, engineers, sailors, truck drivers, and every other blue- or white-collar occupation available can glorify God through the quality of their work.

Some people, who are either misguided or simply lazy, have chosen to pass up the opportunity to use their gifts to help others because they already see other people who are more talented serving, and they feel there is no room for them or that they are not needed. This causes people looking from the outside to believe that only the most skilled and talented are expected to use their gifts for God, while

the less talented people are off the hook. This idea then progresses into the belief that only the most talented people are given abilities and talents, and finally into depression with the pity-party attitude that “if I am not talented, then I must not be important”. However, Jesus tells us differently in Mark 13:34 where He illustrates that every one of His followers has a role and a task to do.

With a loving spirit, we can serve in the lowest positions of society and be serving others like we are serving God Himself. “Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people.” (*Colossians 3:23*). If God’s love is in our hearts, it will shine out in our lives no matter what the task is that we are doing. With God in our hearts, we will be an uplifting presence to everyone we meet.

We must not fall into the trap of procrastination when it comes to service. We must not delay looking for ways we can blend our worship with our work. We must remember that Jesus gave us clear directions we can follow when living our lives, and these directions are that we must tell others about Jesus and bring people to Him. We are responsible for the work we do because our work is a reflection of our worship.

As we conclude this section about our calling and our work, we must remember to place Jesus as our focus. As we get ready to discover the details of our calling, remember that it is both different for everyone, and the same. Everyone’s God-given calling is to glorify and uplift Christ, but how everyone will accomplish this will be different.

So, as we close this section, what are some ways where your current occupation lines up with your calling? If no ways are coming to mind, is there a better position or career you can take steps towards that will unify your life mission with your life work?

(On the following page is space to write out any ideas that come to mind to help you remember them later.)



Chapter 10:

Revelation

"But not everyone welcomes the Good News, for Isaiah the prophet said, 'LORD, who has believed our message?' So faith comes from hearing, that is, hearing the Good News about Christ." (Romans 10:16–17).

We have come far in our journey together and we are coming into the final stretch. This final stretch does not mean we will be finished in our journey with God, because our journey is a life-long expedition. What it does mean is that we are beginning to wrap up what we will be covering in this book.

In this chapter, we will be talking about how God speaks to us, and how we can know whether it is God speaking to us or something else—possibly even God's enemy, Satan.

God speaks to us primarily through two ways, and when these two things are in alignment, we can be sure that this is God's impression. The first way we are able to hear God is through nature. We talked about this in the first chapter, and we specifically noted many of the ways that God's character and personality is revealed through how nature operates. Not only are we able to learn about God in nature, it is in nature where we are able to learn spiritual truths that God wants to teach us. The second way is through the teaching in the Bible.

One of the major deceptions Satan uses to keep us from finding God, or truly finding Jesus, is that He tricks us into stopping short of actually acknowledging the existence of a Creator. We are living in a time where the idea that a Being exists beyond the universe and that this Being ultimately created the universe is laughed at. This deception is grounded in the idea that all that exists are things we can see. More recently, however, since humans have discovered how to harness various forms of energy, the lie has shifted to that the only things that exist are the things that we can understand, use, or manipulate. What makes God a nuisance is that if He is up there, we believe He isn't very clear about it because

He doesn't "show Himself" to us. In addition, the idea of God existing scares many of us because if He exists, then we must reevaluate how we perceive our goals and our lives in general.

Most of the people who have reached this section in our journey understand that there is more than simply the physical world around us. Many of us understand there is a spiritual realm and spiritual forces, but we don't agree on the motive, purpose, and reason for it. However, history has shown that civilizations who reject the idea of God always gravitate towards the creation that resembles the closest image of God that we know of—humanity. Even more specific than that, these civilizations ultimately finish by focusing all of their energy and attention on trying to figure out the human mind—not the brain, but the mind. Our mind baffles our thinking, and many have concluded that the strongest force in existence is the power of a simple idea, grown and cultivated within a human mind.

However, the problem with these ideas and this deception is not with the research or with the discoveries. It is with the premise—that God does not exist. If God were to show up, then people would have a problem, because their ideas would be wrong because God is more powerful than human thought. The other problem with this idea is that the most audacious thought we can imagine, and then create, doesn't even come close to being able to create the complexity that exists presently in nature. This is actually a very valid argument for a Creator existing.

It is through nature that we are able to hear God speak. It is in nature where most people feel closest to God. In nature, we are able to think clearer and experience peace. It may be a little crazy for me to think, but someone who believes that God exists, and that God created nature's beauty for our enjoyment, is able to experience nature in a more meaningful way than the most educated research scientist or the most creative poet.

By learning to listen to how nature works, we are able to understand the truths that God teaches us about obedience, consistency, and trust. We can look into the galaxy and see solar systems and planets orbiting in a logical and calculated fashion. This same order is present scaling down to the inner workings of the tiniest atom. These things are able to show us how logical and rational God is. One of the things God tells us through this is that we can be rational and logical and science does not have to be opposed to the idea that something created life in the beginning.

With the finest detail that exists in nature, we can be sure that God sees us and that He cares for us. God looks down from heaven and He sees everything that is happening in the world. He sees the rich with their struggles and the poor with their problems, and all of us as we move forward through life. He sees us and He loves us dearly. No one anywhere on earth can shed a tear without God seeing it, and at the same time, no one can share a smile without Him noticing.

If we could simply believe this in our own lives and hearts—specifically that God cares for us, and that He is more interested in our wellbeing than we often are—our anxiety would vanish, and we would be free to move through our life with feelings of empowerment and boldness. We would never fill our lives with disappointing thoughts, because we would give everything, both the big things and the small things, over to God who is never confused by our dilemmas, or unsure of what action to take. By believing this about God and giving Him our worries, we could then relax and enjoy the gift of peace that God offers to us.

“How do you see all of this in nature, Cam?” I can already hear some of you asking.

Let us look at some of the animals we see in nature and see if we can find the answer together. For example, look at the birds. Do we ever see them experiencing worry? Does it appear as though they ever experience stress? What about smaller animals? Let’s look at ants. If their home is destroyed, they simply go about creating a new one. If they find food, they are quick to organize themselves to bring it back to their home. We can learn the things that God values through the things of nature. We can also learn how we can live in relationship with God.

There is another way that God speaks to us, and it is through the Holy Spirit impressing on us truths while we read the Bible. It is in the Bible that we see God’s character clearer. In addition, the Bible is where we see how He deals with humanity and how He works saving us from sin. We are able to read the Bible and see an amazing history lesson involving kings, prophets, and famous people who lived long ago. They were people who were “as human as we are.” (*James 5:17*). They faced discouragement, temptation, failing and standing back up, and succeeding with God’s help; and with their stories, we can be encouraged that we can do the same. As we read the stories of these famous people and learn their experiences, we see how God was able to bless them in the past, and how God was able to use them to bless others and to have an impact on the world that was much larger than they could have imagined. By reading their stories, we begin to wonder if we could be like them and experience as close of a relationship with God that they did.

The theme of redemption and deliverance is something that even the angels look at in amazement. With this theme in mind, we should choose to study deeper into Jesus' life. Understanding the significance of Jesus' sacrifice is one of the ways we can show love for God and love for Jesus. Focusing our attention and study time on Jesus' character, and thinking about the reasons He came to save us from our sins will help us grow closer to Him. As we think and study deeper into these truths, our faith and love for Jesus will grow stronger, our prayers will be more genuine, logical, and passionate, and faith and love for Jesus will be a stronger central theme. We will become more stable in our faith in Jesus, and we will be more confident in our daily lives, living through His power with all the challenges that come our way.

Among the amazing things in the Bible, is the fact that the Bible's themes about how we are saved and how Jesus died in our place is understandable to even the most uneducated person. While the Bible presents these truths in such a simple way, there are countless ways for us to study its teachings and countless ways for us to research it and discover additional truths. The only way people can stumble when studying is when they read the Bible with an agenda and they decide to place their agenda ahead of the Holy Spirit's prompting and, instead, trust their own judgment regarding difficult passages.

I hesitate to include this here, because this book falls into the secondary category of the next truth we will look at, but *we should never take the writings or commentaries of anyone, and substitute their words for what the Bible says*. Instead, we should read and study the Bible for ourselves. If we allow others to do our thinking for us, we ultimately miss what God wants to tell us personally. We will only be able to reach the spiritual growth of the writers/speakers we follow, and God desires so much more than that for us. By not studying God's word for ourselves, our minds will become weak to understanding the Bible's themes, and we may miss the deep meaning God wants to show us in our study. To contrast this, our minds and our spiritual lives will grow when we study the Bible, and its themes, by comparing passages with other passages and extracting hidden truths that span multiple verses.

No other book in history has the same ability to strengthen our minds than the study of the Bible. No other book can empower, stretch, and challenge our minds than the truths contained within it. If God's Word were studied as He desires to see us study it, God's truths would saturate our hearts and lives, and we would have integrity and focus that is uncommon in today's culture.

As you may have guessed, reading this book classifies itself as secondary, and I'm willing to accept (*hopefully humbly*) you 'graduating to Bible study'—provided that you truly substitute Bible study in place of this. Also, be wary of, if not run away from, teachers who want you to be exclusive on how you understand the Bible. I will be the first to say the following three things: 1) Mainstream Christianity has fallen away from the truth of the Bible in favor of traditions. 2) You should crosscheck all religious groups who claim to follow the Bible against what the Bible teaches—holistically. (*In other words, looking at all the verses the Bible has to say on a specific topic before formulating a belief*). 3) Don't trust my word about number one, number two, or anything I say in this book or even my entire ministry. Instead, study the Bible for yourself because I still have a lot to learn. *I don't want you to limit your spiritual growth because I hit a wall in my faith walk*. That would be a disservice to both of us. Instead, learn to study the Bible on your own—no matter how boring or dull it might be at first. If you need a place to start, try starting with the Book of Matthew or Mark and read through the life of Jesus in all four books that are about His life (*the other two are Luke and John*).

When we read the Bible, we should not rush through it. It is possible to read the whole Bible from beginning to end and still miss important truths in it. One simple verse, short passage, or one topic studied until its significance is clear in our minds is more useful than skimming over many chapters without a clear focus. One way we can keep the Bible in our minds is by memorizing texts, and by carrying it around with us. In today's modern culture, it is especially easy to keep the Bible at our fingertips when we can load it on to our cell phones and computers. While we go through our day, we can read a short passage and reflect on what it means to us. This will help us embed the passage in our minds and redirect our focus. It will also help us hear the Holy Spirit clearer.

Without prayerful study and a commitment to learn more, we will never gain true wisdom. Some passages in the Bible are too plain to be misunderstood, but there are others where the meaning is not significant at first glance. Bible passages were designed to be compared with each other in the context of prayer, research, and reflection and studying the Bible this way will result in seeing many new truths that are not as plainly visible. Holding Bible passages in our hearts and minds, and reflecting on them empowers, strengthens, and directs our spiritual lives towards God. In addition, we should never study the Bible without prayer. Before opening it to read, we should ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten our minds and open our hearts to its truth.

The Bible is God’s Word and no other piece of literature can compare to the impact it has on people’s lives. Because of this, no other piece of literature should be elevated to an equal standing that the Bible deserves. Studying the writings of any pastor, teacher, researcher, prophet, or student in the place of studying the Bible will damage your relationship with God over the long-term.

“Why would you say that, Cam? Isn’t what we are doing right now in that category?”

Yes, it is. Secondary materials, which includes this book, and any religious thought throughout history has to be compared with the Bible and ‘judged’ on whether it supports the Bible’s truths, or whether it counters the Bible’s truths. It is the goal of this book to lead you deeper into studying God’s Word. My entire ministry has the mission and goal of leading you into studying the Bible and having a relationship with God for yourself. I am not interested in coming between you and God.

I should also mention here that those who hold to the idea that we should worship nature, the universe, or the human mind (*none of which are new ideas*) don’t lead us to anywhere positive and they are Satan’s way of pulling our focus away from God—our Creator. The universe is unable to teach us about the topics of love, morality, or our conscience because these are things that require one Source (*a source that can actually understand these topics*) and that Source is God—specifically a personal ‘conscious’ Being. The universe is organized like a computer or a clock, and we know that computers and clocks don’t know how to experience emotions, not to mention an idea called “love”. We read in the Bible that God is love, and who better to teach us about it than Him.

As we conclude this topic, if you are put off or offended by any of the ideas in this chapter, I would love to talk to you further about this. Unfortunately, this book is a one-way medium. Feel free to use the contact form on designercam.com to respond. I really am not interested in pushing you away. Instead, I am interested in pushing you towards God’s truth!

To close this section, let us remember that God’s Word, the Bible, sets the standard for study, and nothing else can compare with it! Everything else is secondary.



Chapter 11:

Prayer

“Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank Him for all He has done.” (Philippians 4:6).

In the last section, we talked about how God speaks to us. Now we will look at how we are able to talk to God. For us to grow our spiritual lives, we must both listen when God speaks and we must communicate back. When we discuss communicating with God, we are talking about more than simply focusing our minds on Him. Focusing on Him is one step to communicating with God, but this focus is more geared at listening than responding. In order for us to talk with God, we must share something with Him about our lives, such as our struggles, or our successes—by telling Him about it.

This is the essence of prayer. Prayer is simply talking to God the same way we would talk to a close friend. We share our hearts with Him, not because He needs to learn something new or because He doesn’t already know about it, but instead, it helps us open our hearts to receiving Him. Prayer does not pull God down to where we are at; instead, it draws our hearts and minds up to Him.

When Jesus was here on earth, He taught His disciples how to pray. He explained to them that they should share their daily needs with God, and give God their worries. He promised the disciples He would hear their prayers, and we can claim this same promise today.

Jesus modeled a prayer-filled life for us. While on earth, He often would leave the crowds and pray. Jesus is now a member of humanity and He is able to relate with us—with all of our needs and our weaknesses. He did this not only to save us from sin, but also to become a source of strength for us when we face trials. Jesus is our perfect Example, and prayer is how Jesus modeled for us a life where we are able to connect with God. We should follow Jesus’ example, and because sin has infected us, we need prayer more than Jesus did.

By avoiding prayer in our own lives, not only do we miss the blessings that God wants to give to us, but we also move through life in a spiritual darkness. By neglecting prayer, Satan's temptations feel stronger, and we are more prone to falling into his traps. Prayer is one of the greatest tools when faced with temptation, and it is priceless for spotting and avoiding temptations and traps.

So why are we so hesitant to pray, especially when prayer is the key to receiving God's blessing and His protection? Satan and life are attacking us non-stop with distractions, false urgencies, and busy-tasks. Without focused and consistent prayer, and living our lives with God-blessed discernment, we run the risk of falling into the maze of distraction or otherwise straying off the path God has placed before us. Satan knows the power of prayer can bring us peace, reassure us that we are forgiven, and give us the power to resist temptation so he will use any and every way possible to distract us, keep us busy, and outright tempt us in an effort to keep us from turning to God with prayer.

We can do some basic things to assure us that God will hear and answer our prayers. The first thing is that we both believe and feel that we need His help. Those of us who desire to be close to God, and to be filled with His Spirit, can claim His promises to be with us. Another way of saying this is that we must be open to receiving God's Spirit and influence in our lives or we will not be able to receive His blessing.

If you struggle with this first idea, remember and realize that we are human, and because our race has fallen into sin, every one of us needs God's help—whether we realize it or not. By trying to avoid looking at God or to God, we are doing ourselves harm without even realizing it. We should keep looking to God to help us because we are unable to help ourselves.

Another thing we must be cautious about that can get in the way of our prayers is by knowingly holding onto sin in our lives. If we hold onto sin in our hearts, God will not hear us. However, God will always hear our prayers when we come to Him with a spirit of humility, repentance, and gratefulness. We are never able to justify receiving God's favor from our own reputation and actions. Instead, we are worthy because Jesus has saved us from sin. It is through Jesus' blood—a symbol of His perfect life and His sacrifice—that makes us accepted by God.

We must remember that by accepting Jesus, we are also agreeing to take steps forward into a life-long relationship with Him. If we accept Jesus, and decide to go no further, then we choose to reject the blessings and relationship that God offers us. It is as if Jesus helped us climb into God's protective hand, but instead

of moving to the center, to be with Jesus, we decide to stay out near the edge. On the edge of God's protective hand, we are able to see the things we are missing and all the things we use to enjoy, and by looking at what we have given up, we are consistently tempted to go back. While nothing can steal us from God's hand, we invite gusts of wind to push us off, and we invite temptation to lure us away by continually looking at what we are missing. Standing on the edge of God's hand will result in us choosing to give up salvation because we become too concerned with what we are missing instead of what we have gained.

Faith is necessary when we talk about having a deep and meaningful prayer life. "It is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to Him must believe that God exists and that He rewards those who sincerely seek Him." (*Hebrews 11:6*). Jesus told His disciples, "I tell you, you can pray for anything, and if you believe that you've received it, it will be yours." (*Mark 11:24*). Will we take Jesus' words seriously?

This promise that Jesus tells us is both broad and limitless, and as we read about God and the previous promises He gave us in the Bible, we learn and can know that He is faithful to keep this promise to us. Even if we do not receive the answers to the questions we have asked for in the amount of time we think God would need, we still should believe God has heard our prayers and He will answer them. However, sometimes our prayers are either too shortsighted, or we simply have asked for things that would not end up being a blessing to us in the big picture. In these cases, God chooses to answer our requests by giving us things that will ultimately help us—which might irritate us if we are constantly looking only at our present circumstances. If we had the divine insight God has, and we could see the situation through His eyes, we would easily be able to agree with His judgment.

If it seems as though God is taking a long time to answer your request, don't let doubt creep into your thinking. Instead, lean into the promise that Jesus gave us, and trust that He knows when the best timing is regarding the request. We will end up frustrated and mad at God if we demand or think He should always answer our prayers exactly how we think they should be. God happens to be wiser than we are, and if He decides to give us something different from what we asked for, it is because He knows something we don't. Instead of focusing on what we didn't receive and becoming more frustrated with God, focus on using what we now have, and use what is currently available to us to move forward. If it seems as

though He hasn't heard our prayer, we should come to Him again, humbly and respectfully, and ask another time. We can rely and claim the promise that He tells us to "keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for." (*Matthew 7:7*).

If we focus on our fears and doubts, they will grow in our mind and we will give up. If we press ahead blindly or over-plan and try to solve all the uncertainties of the future before stepping out in faith, we will become overwhelmed, confused, and fearful when things stop working. We must balance moving forward with trusting God. By stepping out in faith that He will bring things together in His time, and by sharing our needs, worries, and fears with Him, He will be able to bring us to a place of peace and comfort, and He will give us strength to keep moving forward. Sometimes it seems as though we don't see any evidence He has taken care of our challenge, or it seems as though He is silent in calming our fears, but we can trust He has heard our prayers and He will answer when the time is best.

Perseverance is also necessary when we look at having a strong prayer life. We must always lean into prayer if we are interested in growing our faith and spiritual lives. Constantly praying will keep our hearts and minds connected with God and this connection is what allows life from God to strengthen us, and this connection allows us to reflect God's character in our lives.

We must take our prayer life seriously, and we should make prayer a top priority in our lives. We can help ourselves with this by searching out places and opportunities where prayer is encouraged, accepted, and practiced regularly. When we focus our lives on finding God, we will look for every place we can find where we will be able to meet Him—from prayer meetings in churches, to praying for the sick in hospitals.

As a way of orienting our days, we must make prayer the first thing we do each morning and then remember to keep the conversation going with God throughout the day. Silent or whispered prayers throughout the day are how we accomplish this constant communication. This is what the Bible means when it talks about Enoch walking with God. In spite of what others might think or say, there is no time, place, or situation where it is inappropriate to pray silently to God. Nothing can stand in the way, and nothing should stand in the way, of us lifting our hearts to God with prayer. When we send silent prayers to God, we are able to shut out all the worries and doubts that feel as though they will crush us, take our requests before God, and feel His presence and peace surround us. We should always keep this communication open because this is what allows Jesus to come and live in our hearts and lives.

Keeping prayer as a primary focus in our life is a way we can shield ourselves from the pollution of sin in the world. The atmosphere in our culture is toxic to our spiritual lives, and we must use the tool of prayer to help our minds and hearts breathe God's Spirit.

Some of us might get the idea that God wants us to leave society or perhaps move away from the world in order to devote ourselves completely to worshipping Him. While temporary times alone in nature are helpful for refocusing our lives, I invite you to remember our discussion on how the work we do is part of our worship to God and these two concepts unite under our calling and our service to others. If we retreat from society and from sharing Jesus with others, and instead lean exclusively into prayer, one of two things will happen with our prayer lives: either we will give up on prayer when it seems as though it isn't working, or our prayers will become meaningless and routine. When people neglect their social lives, and withdraw from sharing Jesus with others, they lose the reason that Jesus came, and without this reason, they lose all motivation for prayer and have no reason to continue learning. The prayer lives of these people then become selfish and self-centered.

Without community, the truth God has shared in the Bible loses importance and clarity in our minds, our hearts will slowly fade, and our spiritual lives will slowly die. By staying connected with others who are on our spiritual path, we are able to sympathize with each other's struggles, and with the challenges that we face in the world. If we isolate ourselves from others, we are not fulfilling the instructions Jesus gave to us to go into the world. By focusing on our social lives, and by staying connected to each other, we are better able to sympathize with others and the desire to serve and help others increases.

More importantly than being within a community, is remembering to keep our focus on God. If we lose focus of God while we are serving others, then we will burn out and become self-centered too.

I hope you have gotten a glimpse of the power of prayer. I hope you have begun to understand how prayer can help us grow with Jesus, and how to help our prayer life be meaningful, deep, and effective.

As we end this chapter, spend several minutes reflecting on what God has done for you, and then thank Him for how He has led in your life.

(Space is provided on the next page if you would like to write out your prayer.)



Chapter 12:

Doubt

"But when you ask Him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind." (James 1:6).

We come to almost the end of our discussion, and we must now turn to one of the things that challenges everyone at some point in time in their lives, and it has the ability, if left unchecked, to erode the entire foundation that you have built your life on. This seed of destruction is doubt.

On a rare occasion, doubt is a good thing. If we are getting ready to do something that might harm us, feeling doubts about whether our choices will be wise can help us decide instead to make better choices. In these cases, we might say doubt is positive, because it helped us avoid disaster. Some might call this type of doubt the Holy Spirit, or our conscience, helping to guide us into making better choices.

However, the doubt that we will look at in this section comes from questioning what we believe. What can begin as small questions, such as whether or not the tire on my car has enough air pressure, can escalate to having doubts in the theory of creation or the supposed fact of evolution. Doubts that stem from faith are able to lead in one of two directions: either the doubt leads us to give up on the belief entirely, or the doubt leads us to research the belief to find out if there is any validity to it.

Some people stand on the idea that we must believe with no doubt, and this is true to a point. However, many of the people in this group say that to doubt is to deny God's power and that we cannot call faith "faith" if it was explainable. This is also true to a point. The idea behind these beliefs is that either something can be a fact or it can be faith. There is no middle ground, similar to the idea that religion and true science are not mixable.

However, as I'm sure you can imagine, the worldview we are looking at in this ebook, does not hold to this view. We have talked about how God speaks to us through how nature operates, and how we can learn spiritual truths by studying the way our world works. The truth is that God has never asked us to believe

anything without question, or without giving us evidence to base our faith on. Even things that most people see as pure speculation, such as God's existence, God's character, and the idea there can only be one Truth all have evidence that is logical and understandable.

God has not removed the possibility of doubt from entering our minds. Evidence must be part of the foundation for our faith, and not merely speculation, theory, or popular opinion. With the option of doubt, those who want to find reasons to hesitate and suspect beliefs or theories have plenty of freedom and room to do so, but those who dig in and search out the basis for the beliefs in question will find plenty of evidence to support true beliefs.

Before yelling at me with this example, let me assure you that it is impossible for us, as limited, created beings, to understand the whole mind of our Creator. The smartest, most intelligent, most educated people in the human race will always have questions about God. "Can you solve the mysteries of God? Can you discover everything about the Almighty? Such knowledge is higher than the heavens—and who are you? It is deeper than the underworld—what do you know?" (*Job 11:7-8*). We are able to see the things He has done for us throughout history, and we can begin to see and understand some of the grand, limitless love and mercy He has showed us. We are only able to grasp the plans in both history and our lives that He knows we can understand, and with any details beyond this, we need to trust in His love for us and that He has our best interest in mind.

The Bible, like the character of God, includes mysteries we will never be able to fully understand, because we are limited beings. Things such as sin entering our world; Jesus Christ becoming human while still being fully God; how we can be restored and made clean from sin; how Jesus died and came back to life; and many other topics are things we cannot fully understand as humans. However, simply because we cannot fully understand something does not mean we need to doubt it.

For centuries, the smallest forms of life have puzzled philosophers, and as science progresses, we are consistently finding new pieces to the puzzle of our world. Everywhere we look, we can see things that are beyond our knowledge or understanding. Throughout history, we can see the trend that moves our focus towards studying our minds. However, we will never be able to fully understand this one piece of our existence. The more we learn about our brain, the more our mind baffles us. The more we understand the freedom of choice we have, the more questions arise about why we don't act the way we should.

Why, then, are we surprised that the spiritual world is even more complex and masked in mystery? Our minds are limited and narrow even when we believe the knowledge of our world is growing. God has shared with us, through the Bible, sufficient evidence of His character, and spiritual truths, and just because we cannot fully wrap our minds around these infinitely larger concepts, does not make them false. Science seems comfortable saying that they don't understand some things about humanity, the brain, or our mind *yet*; however, some of us seem to have this idea that we must completely understand God before we will believe in His existence.

Peter, one of Jesus' disciples, tells us that, "the Lord's patience gives people time to be saved. This is what our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you with the wisdom God gave him— speaking of these things in all of his letters. Some of his comments are hard to understand, and those who are ignorant and unstable have twisted his letters to mean something quite different, just as they do with other parts of Scripture. And this will result in their destruction." (*2 Peter 3:15-16*). Some Bible skeptics try to take the fact that the Bible is hard to understand and twist it into an argument that God did not inspire it at all. However, because some parts of the Bible are above our comprehension, this makes a stronger argument for it being inspired by God. If the Bible simplified the greatness and awesome nature of God into something that we could understand as humans, if it were even possible to do so, then the Bible could not have the mark of God in it, because God would no longer be God. The mystery surrounding themes we do not understand present a better case for our faith that the Bible is the word of God.

To admit we cannot fully understand or grasp the extent of the truth that is contained in the Bible is simply admitting that we, as limited humans, cannot understand God. God created humanity, and this means that we cannot understand all the nuances of our Creator, because His is greater than we are. Skeptics, and people looking for an excuse to reject God's word, use the fact that, because they cannot understand all its truth, then it cannot be from God. With this claim, they are implying they know everything there is to know about everything, and it means that they are actually delusional and full of themselves. Even if we believe the Bible, we must not allow temptations like these to cause us to stumble on this point.

Satan is hard at work distorting the truth presented in the Bible, and he instead wants us to become comfortable with our current level of knowledge and let our investigative muscles and curiosity weaken. Satan uses pride mixed with

curiosity to weaken our search into the Scriptures so that when we are unable to understand a passage, we feel impatient, irritated, and defeated. We then feel humiliated that we don't understand, and we are more likely to give up altogether. The pride mixed with impatience makes us unwilling to wait patiently for God to reveal the truth we are looking for. People with this determined pride choose instead to rely entirely on their own human, and therefore limited, brainpower to understand the Scripture, and because they are unable to succeed in their efforts, they deny that the Bible is inspired by God.

If it were possible for any of God's created beings, ourselves included, to actually understand everything about God, we could grow no further. We would have reached the apex of knowledge possible, and our minds could no longer learn, develop, or grow. We would have effectively dethroned God, and we could learn nothing more. Because of this, instead of being angry at the mystery surrounding God, we should thank God for the ability to be curious, to test the limits of what we know, and to grow in knowledge. These things are not opposed to God, because God gave us the gift of free will. To use this freedom effectively, we must be responsible, but the freedom itself is a gift that makes God happy when we use it to learn more about Him and the world He created for us.

It is God's desire that throughout our lives, we will make the choice to continually grow into a better understanding of the truth that is in the Bible, and there is only one way that this knowledge is learned. The only way for us to grow spiritually through the study of the Bible is through God's Holy Spirit inspiring the truths and themes in the Scripture to us. Many popular theories and doctrines that people believe the Bible supports are actually distortions of the Bible's themes. Because there is this disconnect between tradition masking itself as truth and the genuine truth in God's word, many people have become confused and have given up on believing the Bible. We must remember that this is not the Bible's issue, but humanity's misuse of its teachings. We must each study the Bible to learn its truth so we can have personal beliefs and not rest on someone else's opinions. By studying the Bible personally, we can learn about God and not be as susceptible to doubt entering our minds.

God wants us personally to use the reasoning power He has blessed us with, and studying the Bible is the best way to strengthen our minds and hearts. We must be careful not to think too highly of our logic and minds, because our human nature limits everything about us. We also don't ever want to reach a point where we can no longer understand the Bible, and the simple passages that give us hope no longer have the meaning they once did.

There are many things presented in the Bible that are obscure or hidden to us initially, but that God wants to explain to us in simple, easily understandable ways. However, if we blaze ahead without the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we will always run the risk of misunderstanding the Bible's truth. We can read the Bible in ways that won't teach us the truth that God wants us to learn. If we open the Bible without humility, a prayerful attitude, and an eager mind that is open to truth, or when our thoughts and attitudes do not align with His, our minds will fill up with doubt and confusion, and our study will lead to skepticism.

When we become skeptical, Satan has the opportunity to prompt us with false truths and a misunderstanding of what God is trying to teach us. If we are not humble and aligned with the will of God seeking the truth He wants to show us, however smart or educated we are, we are still able to misunderstand the Bible. This is why it is important for us to study the Bible personally, because we cannot see other people's hearts, and if it is easy for us to misunderstand God's word, then it is foolish to blindly trust someone else and their interpretation. People who study the Bible, looking for inconsistencies or other errors, do not have the humility and open mind to receive insights from God. Their distorted vision will cause both confusion and doubt when the Bible's truths would otherwise be plain, simple, and easy to understand.

There is a root, underlying cause at the heart of doubt and skepticism, even though it is almost completely disguised in most cases. This root issue is the love of sin. Proud, sin-loving hearts, and people who are unwilling to obey, do not embrace the restrictions and boundaries that the Bible teaches, and they are quick to discount the Bible's authority because it says they should be avoiding something they enjoy doing. For us to be sure that we will reach truth in God's word, we must have an open mind and a sincere desire to learn and know His truth, even if it clashes with our sinful hearts, and we must be willing to put the truth we learn into practice in our lives. Everyone who studies the Bible in this humble, open-minded, and sincere way will find abundant evidence that the Bible is God's word. In the chapters and verses that we read, our minds are open to learning about God's grace and the great news about salvation.

Jesus told us, "Anyone who wants to do the will of God will know whether My teaching is from God or is merely My own." (*John 7:17*). Instead of questioning, nitpicking, or doubting the things we do not understand, pay closer attention to putting into practice the things we do understand, and we will open ourselves to learning even more. If we apply the truth Jesus taught while He was here on earth,

this will do more to prove to our minds whether or not Jesus was who He claimed to be. We should obey the truth that we have learned, and this will open the door to more truth. Obedience and action are what silence doubt.

There is a type of evidence that is available to everyone—from the most educated person to the most illiterate—and this evidence is our own experience. God encourages us to prove for ourselves that His word is true and that He keeps His promises. Instead of depending on others' understanding of the Bible, we should read it and study it ourselves, and then apply the truth we learn as it is revealed to us. This is the best way to answer the doubt that might surface in our lives. It is also the best way to prove whether any of our doubts are valid or if we have good reason for doubt.

When the people of God are growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus, they will be constantly gaining a clearer understanding of His word. They will be continually reinforcing the truth they know with new insights and revelation within their study. This has been true throughout the history of the church, and it will be that way until Christ returns.

So as we are beginning a new life and our journey with Jesus, remember that trust, action, and testing the truths we learn are the best ways to both apply what we know to be true, and to avoid the doubts that can surface in our heads.

What are some doubts you are thinking about with the information we have looked at so far? Two things to challenge the doubt you feel could be researching the doubts to find out if they are valid beliefs, or applying the truth you are questioning in your life and see whether it stands up to the test of your experience. *The second method is the stronger way to move forward.*

Are you ready to squash the lingering doubts in your life?



Chapter 13:

Celebration

"You love Him even though you have never seen Him. Though you do not see Him now, you trust Him; and you rejoice with a glorious, inexpressible joy." (1 Peter 1:8).

We have been on an amazing journey together, and it might feel like this is the start of the conclusion to our walk together. However, it may be better to think of this as the last topic to keep in mind as we begin the journey of a lifetime.

Before we dig into the idea of celebration, let's look at our journey up to this point. At the beginning of our time together, we were likely viewing the world differently. Some of us might have had doubts about the existence of God, or some of us might have simply grown up believing the Bible, but not really knowing how to make it personal. We started our journey by looking at the idea of God, and presenting the idea that for our entire history, most worldviews have acknowledged the existence of God, and even though they don't agree on the specifics, God was present. What was similar among all these views, and it even carries into the worldviews that don't believe in God, is that we are responsible for our destiny—or that it is our responsibility to make God happy or improve our lives for the better.

However, the goal of this journey is to look at a different worldview. One worldview stands alone and, instead, presents the idea that we don't have to struggle to overcome our faults, because God is interested in helping us with our journey. We identified the cause of why we seem to fail and we have called it sin, and we have defined sin as living life in any way that differs from the way that God created us to live.

We then turned and began looking at several concepts that only make sense if we understand that God wants to redeem us from the sin that has infected all of humanity, including you and me. We looked at the idea that we must "repent" of the sin in our lives, which means that we reject the sin and call it by name. We make a decision not to return to the habits, activities, or lifestyle that caused

us to sin, and instead, we learned we must confess to God that we did wrong, and ask for forgiveness. We learned to define forgiveness as someone taking the punishment we deserve, and in history, only one person has promised to take our place for the sins we have committed: Jesus.

We learned we can be accepted by God when we allow Jesus to come into and replace our life with His. When Jesus enters our life, we are able to follow God's plan. We follow Jesus and grow closer to Him by focusing on Him and by placing Him first in our lives. We also learned how our worship and our work unite when we serve in the calling God gave us when He created us.

We then looked at the importance of studying to learn more about God and Jesus, and how we must continually be studying His book, the Bible, to keep Satan, God's enemy, from deceiving us. We learned the importance of prayer and how it is necessary for us—both when we are studying about God and when we desire true spiritual growth.

We learned in the last chapter that doubt is a real issue, but we can test the truth we learn through logic, reason, prayer, and experience, and if we are humble, repentant, and open to God's truth, He will grow us and teach us new truth we can use.

Now we come to the last chapter, and our topic is a little surprising to me because this is where many Christians miss the mark. The focus of our last section is celebration—or being excited about what God has done for us.

Jesus has called us to be representatives of God throughout the world. Jesus modeled God's character for us and we are to show Jesus' love and mercy to each other. Paul, one of Jesus' early followers, said in a letter, "The only letter of recommendation we need is you yourselves. Your lives are a letter written in our hearts; everyone can read it and recognize our good work among you. Clearly, you are a letter from Christ showing the result of our ministry among you. This 'letter' is written not with pen and ink, but with the Spirit of the living God. It is carved not on tablets of stone, but on human hearts." (*2 Corinthians 3:2-3*). As followers of Jesus, our lives are letters of recommendation to the world.

We have invited Jesus into our lives, and through us, Jesus wants to speak to the hearts of people who do not know Him. Some of these people are nervous about reading the Bible, while others read it, only to be confused because they don't have the Holy Spirit helping them to understand it. The world has a hostile view of God, and as representatives of Jesus, we must act in a way that can show these

people what God is really like. God is not a doormat, like some of you might think when reading this, but He longs to teach us, forgive us, and show us a better way to live. By living lives of integrity, humility, and compassion, we are able to show an accurate picture of Jesus to others.

This next point is where many Christians stumble.

As representatives of Jesus, we should make working for Him and with Him appear attractive, and like the privilege that it is. Working with Jesus brings joy, satisfaction, and fulfillment into our lives like no other combination of tasks can. Those who claim to be following Jesus, but who model an attitude of gloom and doom, an attitude that always displays a negative side to life, or an attitude that gives others the impression that following Jesus is identical to surrendering life's happiness, are falsely representing God's will for our lives. Even though they might not say it, their actions speak loudly that God is not interested in His followers being happy, and through this lifestyle, they are spreading lies about God and Jesus.

Satan is excited when He can lead us into doubt, depression, and hopelessness. His goal is not to pull us towards himself, but to pull us away from God by prompting us with thoughts that God's motives are hurtful, that God is unwilling to reach out to us, or that God is simply unable to save us. He wants all of humanity to believe that God's plan will result in pain and suffering. He succeeds by twisting God's truths so they appear to contradict God's character. He will do all he can to fill our imagination with false ideas concerning God, so that instead of trusting God and His truth, we will view and see God through Satan's eyes, and spread distrust and rumors against Him.

Satan has done a masterful job of twisting our view of a religious life into one filled with gloom and false hope. His plan is to make following Christ appear to others as difficult, meaningless, worthless, and filled with empty rituals; and when Christians, or anyone who claims to follow Christ, present any of these characteristics about their faith in their lives, they are silently seconding the claims of Satan.

Many people walk along life's path focusing on their past mistakes, failures, and disappointments, and they have filled their hearts with feelings of pain and discouragement. Look back on your life for a moment. When you remember the past, do happy, positive memories come to mind, or do past regrets or painful memories fill your thoughts? Life is filled with both positive experiences and negative ones. It is up to us to choose to learn from the negative experiences. After

we have understood what happened enough to learn from the experience, we should then focus on the positive times, filling our minds with positive, uplifting, and wholesome thoughts—applying the lesson to our life, but moving forward without the past pulling us down.

What have been some of the happy memories and experiences in your life? Have you ever experienced fulfillment and the feeling of being spiritually alive? When you look back on the different stages of your life, are some stages happier than others? In the garden of your life, do you see God's promises as being beautiful flowers growing along the path that you walk? Why not focus on the flowers representing the good memories, and let their sweetness fill your heart with joy.

Focusing on the thorns, the thistles, and other weeds in your memory will only hurt and limit you. If you only gather these thoughts and emotions from your mind, and present an always-negative point of view, you are both denying the goodness of God, and you are preventing others who are close to you from living a fulfilled life with God. It is not wise to collect all the negative memories in our past together—along with all the feelings of hurt, disappointment, and pain—and talk them over until we feel discouraged and hopeless. Darkness fills a life and heart that is discouraged. This self-inflicted darkness in the heart will shut out God's light from shining in, and this darkness will spill out of one's life like a shadow looming on the lives of others.

Instead of thinking about what we have left behind, we should focus on, and thank God for, the blessings that He has sent into our lives. Instead of remembering the bad, let us collect all the blessings and positive memories that He has done for us, and focus our minds on them. Through Jesus, humanity now has the option of freedom from sin and the destruction that sin has caused. Jesus Christ paid the price for us, He redeemed us, and He freed us from sin so we can live fulfilling lives with Him. These are the thoughts that uplift us when we group them together in our minds. These are the thoughts God wants us to keep fresh in our minds.

When we doubt God's love and are suspicious of His promises, we dishonor Him and hurt the Holy Spirit. Imagine how a mother would feel if her children were constantly complaining, acting as though she did not have their best interest in mind, when in reality, her whole life has been focused on helping them with their goals and bringing them true happiness and satisfaction. If her children chose to doubt her motives or her love, it would easily break her heart. How would any parent feel if their children treated them this way? Taking the analogy a step further, what would our heavenly Father feel when we choose to distrust His love

or His motives—specifically motives which led Him to give up His only Son to save a band of rebels called “humanity” from sin? *This is the primary example of how much God loves us!*

How many people do we see as we go about our daily lives, say by their actions and attitude that, “God is not interested in me. He probably loves others, but He does not, or He could never love me.” Some people may actually verbalize this.

Thinking or talking this way is damaging your heart, your mind, and the core of who you are. Every time you doubt out loud, you are inviting Satan’s temptation, you are strengthening the habit of doubt in your choices, and you are separating yourself from God’s influence in your life.

When we are tempted, do not even think about saying something that is doubtful or negative. If you decide to dwell on Satan’s suggestions in your mind, distrust and doubtful rebellious questions will fill your mind. If you talk your feelings and thoughts out loud, not only will this reinforce the thoughts in your own mind, but it will also plant the seeds of doubt in everyone you talk to. The resulting doubt in other peoples’ lives might overwhelm them and be impossible for you to ever counteract later. You might come to realize freedom and escape from the doubt of your temptation, but the ripples of your words and the seeds you planted in others’ lives may not result in the same growth of understanding that you experienced.

Our words have the power to uplift others or plant the seeds of doubt that lead to destruction. Because of this, it is very important we share only things that will give spiritual strength and life. Everyone has stress, pain that is difficult to manage, and temptations that are struggles. Do not tell your problems to others, but instead, take everything to God in prayer. Never speaking any words of doubt or discouragement should be a rule and motto for our lives. You can strengthen and uplift the lives of others with a positive outlook on life and by spreading hope and happiness. This isn’t glossing over life’s problems; this is prioritizing others ahead of yourself, and this is trusting God with your struggles.

Many people who we meet struggle with temptation. They are failing the battle against the power of evil and the power of self. When interacting with others with this personal struggle, do not discourage them, and whatever you do, do not share your own struggles. Instead, applaud them for how far they have come, and share confident, empowering words that will motivate them to continue and not give up. In this way, we can let Christ’s light and love shine through us. Unconsciously, we are able to influence others, and we will be encouraging and

strengthening them by being a positive example with our lives. The alternate, like we shared earlier, will unconsciously discourage them and push them away from Jesus and God's truth.

Many people have a flawed idea about what Jesus' life and character were like. These people believe that Jesus' life lacked happiness and joy. They believe His character was strict, harsh, and stern. When faced with this, an incorrect picture of God is tainting these people's lives and goals. We hear people talk about the shortest verse in the Bible that tells us that Jesus wept, but we miss the hidden message in this verse that Jesus was not like this usually.

Our Savior knows human pain because He opened Himself up to humanity by becoming human. While living on this earth, He modeled a life of self-denial, and while people brought their problems and hurts to Him, these things never crushed His spirit or cast a shadow on His life. Jesus never expressed to others that He was stressed or unsatisfied with life. Instead, He always displayed an inner, God-given peace. In His heart was a bottomless spring of spiritual life, and everywhere He went He shared rest, peace, joy, and happiness.

If we focus our minds on how bad other people are, we will find it impossible to love them as Jesus loves us. However, if we dwell on and focus our minds on what Jesus has done for us, and on His love for us, the same spirit of love that Jesus shares with us will flow outward towards others. We must love and respect each other, in spite of the obvious faults and imperfections in their lives. We should practice patience, humility, and selflessness towards others in our lives. Practicing and strengthening these skills will eliminate selfishness and make us generous towards others.

Every day has its share of difficulties, worries, and challenges. Too often we are quick to share the negatives in our lives and not the positives. By displaying anxiety over so many challenges, and showing fear over what might happen, others might conclude, if this were the majority of our conversation, that we did not have a loving God who is interested in hearing our problems, or a caring God who wants to help us with our struggles.

Are we doing ourselves any good acting or being unbelieving or untrusting? Why should we be ungrateful and worried about the future? Jesus is our Friend and all of heaven is interested in our happiness and safety. We cannot let the challenges and stress of life cloud our minds with worry and negative thoughts. There will always be things we could focus on that would cause fear and anxiety. Instead of

falling into the trap that worry sets for us, we should analyze our challenges and avoid gossip or rumors that don't focus on solutions. Worry spreads like a wildfire where trust and confidence are not present.

God wants all of us to live happy, peaceful, and obedient lives. Jesus tells us, "I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid." (*John 14:27*), and "I have told you these things so that you will be filled with My joy. Yes, your joy will overflow!" (*John 15:11*).

As we blaze the trail God has set before us, let us always remember the basics: God loves us; Jesus loves us; and we need God (*who sent Jesus*) to save us from sin. Nothing we can do can change God's love for us, and nothing we can do will stop us from being savable if we are humble and come to God with a repentant heart. The world doesn't understand this, and it is up to us to model and show our world a different way.

As we enter the journey into the rest of our lives, remember to keep Jesus first, and remember that He is passionate about saving us from sin and giving us the best possible life imaginable: both here and forever!

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